YOUNG MEN'S INSTITUTE
NEW HAVEN, CONN.
FOUNDED 1826

Library and Reading Room

Annual Membership, $5.00

This book may be kept out two weeks
If sent for it must be returned at once

Book No. Ar 818/5 | Vol. No.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNE SHAW

BOOKS BY

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

THE SHADOW ON THE DIAL

THE SECRET OF TATE'S BEACH

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SEVEN KEYHOLES

BLUEBONNET BEND

THE BOARDED-UP HOUSE

THE CRIMSON PATCH

THE DRAGON'S SECRET

THE EDGE OF RAVEN POOL

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

MELISSA-ACROSS-THE-FENCE

THE MYSTERY AT NUMBER SIX

SALLY SIMMS ADVENTURES IT

THE SAPPHIRE SIGNET

THE SLIPPER POINT MYSTERY

THREE SIDES OF PARADISE GREEN

TRANQUILLITY HOUSE

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNE SHAW

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/disappearanceofa0000augu_j9x7

"Tell me about that house!" demanded Mercedes. "There must be something queer about it."

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNE SHAW

BY

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

Author of "The Adventure of the Seven Keyholes," "Bluebonnet Bend," "The Sapphire Signet," "The Shadow on the Dial"

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

Garden City, New York

1928

Cur 818
5

COPYRIGHT, 1928, BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	TWILIGHT IN WINDY HOLLOW	1
II	MERCEDES ENTERS THE HOUSE	14
III	WHAT FOLLOWED NEXT	28
IV	KENNETH TACKLES THE PROBLEM	39
V	IN THE FOG	52
VI	ENTER NUMBER FIVE SURFMAN	65
VII	THE GRAY SHAWL	76
VIII	CAPTAIN MATSON IS PUZZLED	87
IX	DOWN THE BAY	100
X	ON PATROL	111
XI	A NEW FACTOR IN THE PROBLEM	122
XII	A SCRAP OF PAPER	133
XIII	WARNING!	144
XIV	THE THUMB OF BENNIE MORRIS	155

CHAPTER		PAGE
XV	Some Side Lights on Anne Shaw	166
XVI	Mercedes Goes It Alone	177
XVII	The Search Is On	189
XVIII	The Clue of the Silver Spectacles	201
XIX	The Secret of the Cushman Shack	211
XX	The Prisoner Free	222
XXI	The Mystery of Anne Shaw	235

ILLUSTRATIONS

"Tell me about that house!" demanded Mercedes. "There must be something queer about it." *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

She vowed to herself that she would not back out now 14

Mercedes saw Sanford approach the window and cautiously peer in. 120

"What's the meaning of all this?" 222

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNE SHAW

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNE SHAW

CHAPTER I

TWILIGHT IN WINDY HOLLOW

ARE you quite sure this is the right road, Ken? It looks perfectly awful to me!"

"Sure as I can be of anything, Mercy, that I haven't seen in four or five years. But it's got to be the road, for there absolutely *isn't* any other from Orrstown down to the Coast Guard Station."

The little roadster plowed on through the heartbreaking sand ruts that cut a winding swath between the undergrowth of bay bushes and scrub in the hollow back of the sand dunes. The clash of the shifting gears and the throb of the protesting motor almost drowned the steady boom of the surf off to the east, invisible behind the green-capped dunes. To the west, the blue

waters of Barnegat Bay were melting into the wine tints of sunset.

The two in the car were silent—Kenneth Haynes too busy with steering wheel and shifting gears for speech, his sister Mercedes too breathless from being bounced and bumped and jolted from side to side for even an attempt at it. Suddenly the car came to a stubborn halt, the tires revolving helplessly without an inch of progress in the deep, dry, shifting sand of the road.

" 'The time has come, the Walrus said,' " moaned Ken, " 'to talk of many things!'—mainly getting out and jacking up the rear wheels, or finding some board to lay down for them to run over. "Out you go, Mercy, and take a hand, or we'll never reach the C. G. Station in time for supper—unless Captain Matson has the sense to send out a rescue party for us!"

Mercedes scrambled out on her own side at the same time that Kenneth left the car on his, and they began a fruitless search both behind and in front of the car for boards or stray scraps of wood. They could not penetrate far into the brush on the sides of the road, as it was much too thick and thorny and non-negotiable. Disgusted at last, Ken elected to give it up and try

the motor once more before laboriously extracting the jack from the depths of their luggage and trying to set it up in the shifting sand.

"The engine's cooled a bit by this time—perhaps she'll do the trick after all," he muttered hopefully and climbed back to "step on it." And, to their joy, the cooled motor really did take hold, the tires found a grip in the unstable surface of the road, and, with a mighty heave, the roadster extricated itself and slid to more solid ground.

"This was always the worst patch," remarked Ken, as his sister scrambled in once more and they resumed the journey. "From this point on it's pretty clear sailing, if I remember right. Look—over to your left is the Coast Guard Station lookout—you can just see it over the dunes—and on the right toward the Bay is the tower of the old Shaw place. Queer old dump, that! Only house in this vicinity for miles and miles around. Coast Guard fellows and fishermen always declare it's haunted. Even Captain Matson seems to be kind of leery of it, at times."

"A haunted house?" cried Mercedes, shivering with half-delightful terrors. "How perfectly thrilling!—And in this lonely spot, too! Why

didn't you tell me there was going to be a haunted house around, Ken? Did you ever go in it? Who lives there? What's it like, anyway?"

"Hot snakes! Expect me to answer all those questions at once—and in this racket?" shouted Ken, over the roar of the grinding motor. "Have a heart!" The little roadster plowed on, silent as far as further conversation was concerned, and Mercedes had to content herself with staring at the roof and cupola of the old Shaw place, gradually looming nearer through the cedars that surrounded it, and speculating on the nature of its particular "haunted" qualities. The possibility lent a certain zest and flavor to an expedition that she had thought was to be devoted only to her brother's fishing interests.

It was a curious combination of circumstances that had led to her being where she was at all. Her plans had all been made to accompany her mother on a European trip for the summer as soon as her school had closed for the season. She had been wildly excited over the prospect, as it would have been her first trip of the kind. Then, suddenly, her mother had been called away to Chicago by the illness of an aunt who lived there. And later had come the word that the

European trip was off because the illness threatened to be severe and long and her mother felt that she could not leave while it lasted. It was at this crisis that her brother Ken had come to the rescue, proposing that, since she was now at "loose ends," she accompany him on a fishing trip he had long been planning.

"But, Ken," she had demurred, "how can I stay at that wild beach on the Jersey coast? Why, there's nothing there but the Coast Guard Station, you've said. It's no place for a *girl,* is it?"

"There's a perfectly good cottage there belonging to Captain Matson," Ken had asserted. "He lives there with his wife and one son, about your age. Mrs. Matson's a fine woman and a gorgeous cook. I've boarded there with them, and I know. I'm certain they'll take you, too. I'll write the Captain to-day. And you'll see something of a side of wild life you've never seen before and learn a few things about surf fishing and squids and making a decent cast, or I'll eat my new fishing outfit! Do you heaps more good than any old traipsing about Europe!"

So it had been arranged. And Mercedes, secretly pleased and flattered beyond words to

be wanted on such an expedition by her twenty-year-old brother in his second year at Yale, prepared for a season of complete roughing it. And now they were nearing their destination.

The Shaw house disappeared in a dense clump of cedar trees, and the Coast Guard Station loomed large and clean and imposing at the end of the sandy road where the dunes met the beach. And at its foot nestled a comfortable little cottage, its tiny screened porch opening directly out onto the sand. And in its doorway stood the welcome figure of Captain Matson.

"Heard you coming 'bout a mile off!" he grinned, advancing to the car, his spare erect figure and tanned face under the peaked cap lighted by the blaze of the setting sun over the Bay. "How you, Ken, boy? My, but you've grown a yard since I saw you last! So this is your sister. How do, miss? Come right in. Ma's waitin' with fried clams and baked shad and I dunno what-all!"

In the flurry of arrival and welcome, Mercedes had little time to notice anything except that Mrs. Matson was a cheery, spry little wisp of a woman, comfortable and welcoming and hospitable; that her tiny box of a bedroom was immaculately neat and cosy, and that its one

window looked out over the dunes with a glimpse of the tossing ocean between two of them; that the supper table in the one combined living room, dining room, and kitchen was set forth with every manner of inviting sea food, and that she was going to be tremendously comfortable and well cared for.

When the meal was about half through, the young Matson boy came in and shyly took his place at the table. He responded only in monosyllables to Ken's hearty, "'Lo, Skinny!" and further efforts at conversation, and was completely speechless on being introduced to Mercedes by his father as, "Here's Sanford—always known as Skinny! Lives up to his nickname, too. But he can't help it. Takes after his Dad!" She noticed only that he could blush like a girl and that his blue eyes had a positively agonized expression in them under his father's teasing. She thought that, for a boy of seventeen, he was the shyest thing she had ever encountered. He disappeared from the table abruptly after a hastily bolted meal.

Later she came upon him again as she was strolling along the beach after supper. Ken had gone over to the Station with the Captain, and

she had been left to her own devices. She encountered the Matson boy picking up a great armful of driftwood, presumably for his mother's kitchen fire, and determined to break the ice of his shyness, if possible.

"Hello, Sanford. Can't I help you gather some of that?" she began offhandedly, and stooped to pick up some driftwood that lay at her feet.

"Oh, don't do that!" he cried. "It ain't—isn't necessary. Ma has all she'll need for morning with just what I've got."

Mercedes did not insist. "All right, then," she agreed. "But after you've taken in the wood, won't you come out and talk with me awhile and show me around?—that is, if you haven't anything else to do. Ken's gone over to the Station and probably forgotten that I exist by this time, and I'm kind of lonesome."

The boy nodded, plainly pleased by her invitation but, as usual, too shy to express it, and later hurried out to where she sat atop of the nearest dune. Toward the west the sky was a bright pageant of gold and crimson barred with purple belts of cloud. To the east the sea lay, a delicate floor of mauve and lavender, with

crested breakers booming in on the sand. Mercedes thought it the loneliest beach she had ever seen, with its broken dunes stretching away, mile after endless mile, to the north and south, with never a vestige of human habitation in sight. She was distinctly glad when the boy joined her and timidly suggested:

"Do you want to walk about a bit? I can show you around some before dark."

"Please do," she assented, jumping up. "And let's get off this beach for a while. It makes me kind of lonesome and half afraid to-night—there's so much of it, and it's so wild. To-morrow, in broad daylight, I'll begin to get used to it better. What's over beyond the dunes?"

"Mostly just woods. There isn't any other house but that Anne Shaw place," he informed her as they made their way through a sandy lane between high bay bushes, beach plum, and scrub cedar toward the interior. Suddenly Ken's remarks about the Shaw place came back to her. She had forgotten them during the excitement of arrival.

"Oh, tell me about that house!" she demanded. "Ken said something about its being thought

haunted—anyhow, there must be something queer about it. I never saw a stranger or more lonely looking place."

Mercedes was distinctly conscious, as she made these comments, of a curious change in expression that passed over the face of the Matson boy. His big gray eyes were wide open and straightforward in gaze, his usual expression honest and direct, even if shy. But now she was aware of the sudden entry of something that seemed almost like fear—a shrinking expression in his candid look. And, as if unconsciously, too, his voice lowered as he replied:

"Don't you know about the Shaw place? Thought probably Ken would have told you. I don't know if it's haunted or not—they say nowadays there isn't any such thing—but it's a straight fact that old Anne Shaw's queer, and that house is full of queer things that happen—things no one can explain." He suddenly became confidential. "Do you know, I'm going to tell you something. I was over there to-night—just before supper. Ma wanted me to see if Mrs. Shaw would sell her three chickens for to-morrow. I found the old lady wandering round the chicken yard with a telescope in her hand, and

she didn't pay the slightest attention to what I was trying to say, and right in the middle of it rambled off into the house and left me standing in the chicken yard."

"How very singular!" marveled Mercedes. "What's the matter with her—is she crazy?"

"Well, it isn't exactly that," said Sanford. "She's sensible enough about a whole lot of things. And she's a mighty bright talker, too. But there's something about her that none of us have ever been able to make out. You see, she's always lived here, and the Coast Guard people come and go. Even Dad's only been here fifteen years, so we don't know all there is to know about her. She calls her place here Windy Hollow, and I'll tell the world it's a good name for it! If you could hear the breeze howling around there on a windy night— and all those old shutters of hers banging! But I didn't tell you what else happened to-night."

They had approached nearer to the old house while they were talking. Mercedes noticed, even in the failing light, its weatherworn gray shingles, the battered shutters to its many windows, some of them hanging by one hinge, the curious cupola high up over the third story,

looking out to the four points of the compass through as many windowed sides. Did she imagine it, or was there really the fleeting glimpse, for just one brief instant, of a face at one of those cupola windows—a wild, staring face, framed in white hair, peering out toward the sea?

"Look! Was that——" she began, but Sanford interrupted her to call out:

"Look there!—her cow's got loose and is trampling up the garden. Cricky! but she'll be mad. Excuse me for just a minute while I go chase her out." And, yelling, "Hey, Dolly! Get out of that!" he shot off through the twilight to chase a rather lean and hungry-looking cow round and round in a fenced space, leaving the girl temporarily to her own devices.

Mercedes could never explain just what it was that drew her nearer and nearer to the eerie old mansion. Half afraid, half curious, she approached the wide veranda, and, as the mosquitoes were beginning to be troublesome, she decided to wait for Sanford on a seat well out of reach of the pests, the rickety veranda railings. She had just ascended the steps and was about to perch herself on a portion of the railing

that seemed least tumbledown when she was arrested by a curious sound, apparently coming from within the house itself. Did somebody call? She couldn't be sure. The sound had been so vague, so indefinite in location. And yet a distinct feeling that it had been meant as a call drew her toward the front door, which stood partially open. She could see nothing within except the vague outline of a staircase ascending from the blackness of the lower hall. Outside she could hear Sanford still noisily chasing the cow. Inside a deathlike stillness prevailed.

Suddenly she went cold to her finger tips, and her scalp prickled as if every separate hair had risen in sheer terror, for the deathlike silence within the house had been broken by a long, keen, piercing shriek that froze her blood and set her knees shaking under her in helpless terror.

CHAPTER II

MERCEDES ENTERS THE HOUSE

THERE was dead silence after that uncanny sound. When Mercedes had recovered from the immobility of sheer terror, she stood for a moment undecided whether to rush off to the garden to find Sanford or go forward into the house to see what was the matter. That desperate shriek could only mean that someone was badly in need of help. Somehow it seemed cowardly to rush off, and she heard the boy chasing wildly down the path toward the Bay in pursuit of the cow, which had bolted out of the garden and was plunging away to freedom. Someone in that house needed her help. Taking her courage in both hands she entered the open hall door.

"Is anybody here?" she called up the dark staircase. There was no reply. The silence and the darkness pressed on her like a leaden weight. She felt as if she could hardly breathe, but, hav-

She vowed to herself that she would not back out now.

ing entered upon the undertaking, she vowed to herself that she would not back out now. After all, what was there that could hurt her? A poor, forlorn, helpless old lady might be in dire need of assistance in this deserted place, and she, Mercedes Haynes, was not going to be the one to forsake her in a possible hour of need.

"I know that sound came from upstairs," she muttered to herself. "Perhaps I'd better go up and see where she is. She must be ill or have fallen down and injured herself or something."

Slowly and cautiously she proceeded up the stairs, her eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the dimness. A window at the head of the stairs showed her faintly the direction of the upper hall, and she followed this hall along its entire length, peering into all of a number of rooms that opened into it, and calling at intervals, "Is anyone here? Is anything the matter?" In the fast-waning twilight she could just perceive that every room was empty of human occupation. Then a sudden idea struck her.

"She must be up in that cupola," she decided. "I'm just certain I saw a face up there. I wonder how I could get up?" There was a third floor, she realized, over the one she was now on, and

the cupola was above that. But where were the stairs? Retracing her steps to the head of the first flight, she found a partly open door which she discovered led to another stairway. Hurrying up this one, she spied at last the ladderlike steps that led undoubtedly to the cupola, and questioning or calling no further, she scrambled up them and found herself at last enclosed in the tiny space that formed the cupola. One glance sufficed her to ascertain that there was no one else there.

"Well, this *is* a mystery!" she muttered. "I'd better go right down and find Sanford—or somebody." But before she went she stood a moment looking out through the open windows at the magnificent view from the four sides of the cupola—the darkening ocean with the Coast Guard Station looming up not far away, the long stretch of dunes to north and south, the wild reach of dense woodland carpeting the narrow belt of land as far as eye could see, the last faint glow of sunset over the Bay. "I don't wonder anyone likes to come up here," she thought. "That view just takes your breath!"

She turned to go down the ladder and, as she did so, she stumbled over something on the floor

at her feet. Stooping mechanically to find out what it was, she discovered it to be a long, old-fashioned telescope or brass spyglass.

"She must have dropped this in a hurry," thought Mercedes. "That means she went down from here after I saw the face—if it *was* she! Now I'm going straight to find Sanford. He must be wondering where I went." Hurrying down the next two flights and out the front door, she found Sanford walking round the house and peering up at it and calling her name, and he met her with obvious wonder written large on his countenance.

"Where—where"—he stuttered—"how come you've been inside that house—alone? I—I'm sorry I had to leave you. Just got that contrary beast, Dolly, shut up in her barnyard. She led me clear down to the Bay. But why did you go in there? Weren't you afraid?"

"There's something the matter in there, Sanford," she panted breathlessly. "Just as you started to chase the cow, I saw a face up there in the cupola and heard a perfectly blood-curdling shriek. And I was afraid the old lady was hurt, or something was the matter; and you were 'way off and couldn't hear me call, so I

just went in to see if I could be of any help. I couldn't do anything else—could I?" The boy looked at her with real admiration.

"Gee! But you're braver than I'd have been," he acknowledged. "I'd have hated to go in there after hearing—that."

"Yes, but you *would* have gone just the same," insisted Mercedes. "I hated it too, but I didn't dare not to. But, Sanford, I can't find anyone there. There's absolutely no one in the house, I think. I even went up to the cupola, where I thought I'd seen a face, and that was empty too. Only the old telescope was lying on the floor."

"Did you look in the kitchen and other rooms downstairs?" inquired the boy. "She spends a lot of time there. Let's go look now. She may have got hurt or something. But she's so queer —there's no telling."

They both went in through the front door to the now absolutely dark hall, and Sanford produced a small electric torch from his pocket, which was a welcome addition to their quest. Through a deserted and long-unused dining room they passed to the big, dark panelled kitchen beyond. The place was absolutely void of

any human being. Half a dozen cats scampered off the back steps at their approach and disappeared under the house.

"She keeps 'em by the dozens," Sanford announced. "Seems to be crazy about 'em. I guess she must have about fifteen around here now. Well, she isn't here. I took a squint into the parlor as we went by, and that was empty too. Now the only thing to do is look out in the chicken yard or the barn. Though how she could have got out there without either of us seeing her, I don't quite understand."

They ran out through the kitchen door, down the steps, and out through a rather ill-kept chicken yard to the tumbledown barn where the flashlight revealed only a time-worn, battered surrey and some rusty farming implements. No living being was within its walls. They stood and looked at each other, baffled.

"There's only one other place," Sanford finally declared, "and that's the old pump over in the bushes where she gets her drinking water. She won't drink the water from that pump in the kitchen. You stay here a minute while I run over and see."

He left her standing by the veranda near the

front steps and darted into the thick shrubbery just south of the house. While he was gone, Mercedes stood there listening to the faint wood sounds, the creaking and crackling and chirpings—and had time to marvel at the queer muddle into which she had been so unceremoniously plunged. Was it possible that she only a few hours ago arrived in this totally unfamiliar location, become acquainted with these new people, strolled along the beach feeling lonesome and a little resentful that Ken had gone off and left her to her own devices so soon? And here she was, not half an hour later, hunting frantically for a hitherto totally unknown and as yet unseen old lady, and had been alone through a dark house reputed to be haunted! Life was certainly a strange affair!

Sanford came back at this point, preceded by the flash of his torch, and announced no luck at the pump in the bushes. "Though there's one of her pails standing by it," he added. "But I don't somehow think she could have got out there after you heard that noise. She'd have had to pass right by you, and you'd surely have seen her. There've been funny things happen in that house, but we never heard any shrieking before.

Something must be the matter with her, but where she could have got to beats me. I think we'd better go over now and get some of the Coast Guard fellows on the job hunting for her. It's kind of up to them, anyway, to see that everybody's safe around here. Let's go right away."

Lighted by his electric torch, they found their way back through the lane to the Matson cottage, and at the door Sanford paused to say, "I'll go into the Station and tell the fellows. They'll get up a search party and go through the woods, and we'll hunt all over the house again, too. She might have fallen down somewhere and be lying where you couldn't see her upstairs."

"And please send Ken out to me, won't you?" begged Mercedes. "Unless he wants to join the search party. But I'm kind of anxious to see him now."

Sanford agreed and disappeared into the Station, while she went to sit on the little screened porch alone and stare over at the Coast Guard Station, whose lighted windows made the darkness more cheerful. Presently a number of young Coast Guardsmen came out, headed by

Sanford Matson and hurried off in the direction of the old Shaw place, while her brother Ken strolled over to join her.

"What's all the row about?" he demanded. "Seems to me you got into a powerful mix-up the minute I left you alone. Couldn't make it all out from Skinny's rather disjointed tale, but I gather that there's something the matter with old lady Shaw."

Carefully and with considerable detail his sister gave him a history of the evening's adventure, to which he listened with growing excitement. When she finished he exclaimed:

"Cracky! But you seem to have tumbled into a real humdinger of a mystery—I'll have to hand it to you! Guess I'll run over and join the boys and see if I can lend a hand." And he was off the veranda while his sister was protesting:

"Oh, don't go! Or take me with you if you do. I've been left alone by you long enough this evening."

"Well, hurry up, then!" he cried. "Don't know what they may be up to, but you'd better stick pretty close to me. You're apt to get lost here if you don't know your way around."

With renewed excitement Mercedes plunged

along in the dark after her brother, and presently they brought up in front of the old house where two or three of the Coast Guards were skirmishing around in the bushes.

"Hullo, Dane! Found anything yet?" called out Ken. A tall young fellow answered:

"Not yet, Ken. We're going to beat up right around here while the others are going through the house again. Then we'll divide up and go north and south through the woods. She can't have got very far away. The beach patrol will keep an eye out for her on that side of the dunes. Come along with us if you will. The more the merrier."

"All right. This is my sister, boys. You'll meet her more ceremoniously to-morrow. Can't see anyone much in this darkness, anyhow. We'll stick around wherever we can be most useful."

Two of the boys had flashlight torches, and Ken and Mercedes followed them as they pushed their way through the undergrowth, turning the lights into all the obscure or possible corners, without, however, discovering the faintest trace of a human being. Presently the contingent that had been searching the house came out, de-

claring that they had nosed into every nook and cranny in the house without the slightest success and were now prepared to join the search party to go through the woods.

"This won't do for you, Mercy," declared her brother. "They may be at it all night, and it's no place for a girl—in that wilderness. I'll take you back to the house, and you'd better go to bed. Skinny and I will stick around with the fellows and see if we can help out." And he hurried her back to the house, leaving her in the care of Mrs. Matson, to whom she had to retail the whole affair.

"That woman's the queerest piece of work I ever heard tell of," commented the Captain's wife. "I've lived here fifteen whole years, and I'm hardly on speaking terms with her yet. She raises chickens, and I go over and buy some—or eggs—once in a while, but that's all I ever see of her. Sanford, he goes over and does some work for her sometimes, carpentering and such-like that's too heavy for her, but mostly she does everything herself and doesn't want anyone else around. They say she spends a lot of time up in that tower looking out with a telescope. I'm sure I dunno what for. But I can't think what may

have happened to her to-night. And where she could have got to sure is a puzzle."

"I've heard that they say the house is haunted," commented Mercy. "Of course I don't take any stock in that sort of thing. What do you think about it, Mrs. Matson?"

"Well, I ain't never seen the ghost that could convince me, yet," asserted Mrs. Matson dryly. "And I never go over to that house except in broad daylight, so I really don't feel able to say. But the Coast Guard fellers, they prowl around there pretty often, and according to their yarns the old ranch is just sizzlin' with queer sights and sounds. I don't believe a quarter of 'em, though. They say that, certain times, she'll stay up in that tower all night peering round with the telescope—goodness knows what at! And she always keeps a lamp burning all night in one of those upper windows that look south. And sometimes they hear moaning or strange sounds like—well, I dunno what. I never heard any. And one of the fellers declares he heard talking on that veranda all of one night, pretty near—two people—though there wasn't a soul *on* the veranda nowhere. He stayed in the bushes and watched. Well, anyhow," she ended, rising,

"I'm going to bed, and I guess you better go too. Ain't no manner of use sitting up for them fellers to come back—they may be gone all night."

Mercedes also rose and went into her tiny room and prepared for bed. But for long hours afterwards she lay there sleepless, mulling over the surprising events of the evening, listening to the never ceasing wash and thud of the breakers just beyond the dunes, and wishing that her brother would come back. At last she heard his voice bidding good-night to some of the Coast Guards, and his steps plowing through the sand to the veranda. When she had heard him enter the house and tiptoe softly past her door, she got up and opened the door and called to him in a whisper:

"Oh, Ken! Do tell me if you found anything!"

"Nothing but one thing," he whispered back. "We beat it down—at least the fellows that I was with did—through that path that goes south a couple of miles or so from her house. And we never saw a trace of her except one thing near the entrance of the woods. There lay—right in the middle of the path—a pair of old-fashioned silver-rimmed spectacles that the Coast Guards

declare belong to the old lady. She wears 'em all the time. Can't see without 'em, probably. But that was absolutely all. Can you beat it? She couldn't have got far in that tangle, even if she had gone to the end, so we all thought, and we decided that she must have turned around and come back. So we all came back, and the fellows went on to join the other party. I decided I'd better get some sleep if I'm going to do any fishing to-morrow, so I turned in. Enough of 'em to hunt, anyway, and they know the ground better than I do. Pretty slick little mystery, isn't it? Well, I'm going to turn in. Don't let it worry you. The old lady probably'll be found safe and sound in the morning, pottering about as per usual. Good-night!"

But in spite of the salt breath of the ocean through her window, and the measured music of its rhythm, there was little sleep for Mercedes Haynes during the remainder of that night.

CHAPTER III

WHAT FOLLOWED NEXT

MERCEDES awoke next morning, after some fitful naps toward daylight, to find that her brother had departed before dawn on a fishing excursion down the beach and had said not to expect him back till he got there. She felt rather impatient to think that he would go off unconcernedly fishing when an unsolved mystery of the night before awaited his attention. But that was like Ken! She ate a solitary breakfast, and before she had finished, Captain Matson came in to invite her to go through the Coast Guard Station and see its working and become acquainted with some of the boys.

She became deeply interested in the thrilling description of how the lifeboats and breeches buoys were worked, and almost forgot for a time the affair that had so occupied her thoughts the night before. But when the Captain took her up to the lookout tower and she had discovered

much the same view as from the cupola of the Shaw house, only with a better one of the beach, and found that the particular Coast Guard who was on lookout duty was young Dane of the night before, she could no longer restrain her curiosity and asked:

"Please tell me, Captain Matson, did they find out anything more about old Mrs. Shaw? I'm so anxious to hear."

The Captain laughed a rather sceptical laugh. "Nary a sign of her last night, and she ain't back this morning. But don't you worry none, miss. That old lady's hard as hickory and independent as all get out. There ain't nothing happened to her, you can take my word for it. She's done queer things before now and got us all stirred up thinkin' something'd happened to her and always turned up again, right as a trivet. Those boys combed the whole place last night, and apart from those spectacles of hers, which she might have dropped anytime (she probably has more than one pair), they didn't find one livin' thing. I've always thought she's got some queer hiding places around somewheres and goes into one of 'em occasionally for the Harry only knows what reason. She'll come back in a day

or two, and meanwhile Sanford can go over and milk her cow and look after her chickens and see no harm comes to the place." And with this optimistic theory, the Captain led her downstairs to show her the dormitory and kitchen.

A little later Mercedes met Sanford coming out of his own house. It was the first time she had seen him that day. "I'm going over to the Shaw place," he informed her, "to look after things a bit. Want to come? Maybe we can find out something in daylight that we couldn't last night." She assented joyfully and joined him.

"I don't agree with Dad," he remarked as they proceeded through the lane. "He thinks this is just one of her usual capers and that she'll come back all right pretty soon, just as she's done before. Well, maybe she will, but somehow it struck me different. Nothing ever happened quite like this before. Once or twice, they say, she's disappeared for a couple of days or so—just left the house standing like it was. No one knew where she went, or asked, and she'd just appear back again after a while and go on as usual, and no one thought much about it. But we were there evidently when she went, this

time, and there were some pretty queer things about it."

While they were talking, they had come to the gate of the Shaw place and turned in to ascend the veranda steps.

"Wouldn't it be queer if she had come back again in the meantime?" suggested Mercedes.

"Yes, but she hasn't," Sanford replied, shaking his head. "The place is just as it was last night. I passed here a little while ago. I'll go out and feed the chickens now, and you can be looking around, if you want. Don't be afraid. There isn't a thing here that can hurt you."

"But suppose she were to come back suddenly —or even if she didn't," objected Mercedes, "wouldn't she be indignant to have a perfect stranger prowling around her house?"

"No chance her coming back just now," said Sanford. "And you aren't prowling around her house just out of curiosity—you're doing it to try and help find out what's happened to her. That makes it different."

Mercedes had to agree that maybe it did, and, while Sanford found the chicken feed and went outside to tend the hens, she embarked on a cautious tour of the house. She did not spend

much time in the parlor to the left of the entrance. An old square piano, two or three uncomfortable rockers, a center table, and some large marine pictures on the walls composed its furniture and offered nothing of interest in connection with her search. It was obvious that it was merely an apartment of ceremony and never entered by its owner except to arrange or clean it.

She passed on into the unused dining room (old Mrs. Shaw herself undoubtedly ate in the kitchen) and found nothing of interest in it either, except for the pair of spectacles that had been found the night before, which had been left by someone, probably the Coast Guardsman who found them. There they lay, on the bare long dining table, awaiting the problematical return of their owner. Somehow it gave Mercedes a creepy feeling just to see them, and, without touching them, she passed around the table to investigate a closed door on the other side of the room. In the hasty search of the night before and the semi-darkness it had escaped, apparently, both her notice and Sanford's.

It opened at her touch, and she found herself in a semi-dark room, one glance at which was

sufficient to reveal it as a bedroom, and one in use, at that. It was undoubtedly the one where Mrs. Shaw slept. The shades were drawn nearly to the bottoms of the windows, the bed was made but had not been slept in, and a variety of articles, boxes, and piles of old newspapers were stored in all the four corners of the apartment. But there was no sign of any very recent occupation of it by the old lady—not at least within the last twenty-four hours. Mercedes felt that here she had no business to pry any further, so she went out, softly closing the door behind her.

She turned in the hall to the stairs and ascended to the second floor for another inspection of the numerous bedrooms on it. They all opened into a T-shaped hall and were all equally empty of interest. Most of them contained dismantled beds and huddled furniture long out of use, and a dismal air of unoccupation pervaded them all. It was the same on the third floor, to which she next ascended, only that the bedrooms were smaller, and two or three were empty of any furnishings. They all smelt musty and dank from having been shut up for doubtless an indefinite period. Mercedes left them

and climbed the ladderlike stairs to the cupola. She felt a great curiosity to see by daylight what she had had only a brief glimpse of the night before, from this high perch.

Her first glance was out of the four windows at the breath-taking view in the dazzling morning sunlight. On the ocean side a five-masted schooner stood out on the horizon, every white sail spread. She could actually see the dip of the prow to the turquoise ocean and the break of foam under its foot. To the south Barnegat Light stood out, a slender shaft illumined by the morning sun. Mercedes drew in a long breath of delight at the sheer beauty of it all. But the scenery was not that for which she had climbed to this height, and reluctantly she tore her gaze from it and glanced about the tiny space. A moment after she had done so, she uttered a little gasp and dropped to her knees for a closer look at something on the floor.

Then she scrambled down the ladder and hurried to the lower floor calling, "Sanford! Sanford, come here!" as she got to the kitchen door.

"What's the matter?" he replied from the chicken yard where he stood surrounded by a

flock of pecking hens. "Has the old lady come back?"

"No, no! but I've something to show you—in the cupola. Do come up right away. I can't make out just what it means."

He dropped the now empty pan of chicken feed and hurried after her as she climbed the stairs once more and clambered into the cupola. Once there, she merely stood and pointed to the floor, demanding, "What do you make of that?" He dropped to his knees for a better view and presently uttered a long low whistle.

"When did this get here, do you suppose?" he asked, staring at the spot. "I'm almost positive it wasn't here last night. One of the C. G. fellows had an electric torch, and we examined all around here. I don't think there was anything of the kind here then."

Mercedes bent down to examine it again. It was the impression of a hand, clear and distinct, all five fingers well outspread, on the painted boards of the flooring of the cupola. But the most startling thing about it was that the impression on the worn gray paint of the boards was in a faint dull red.

"Can it be *blood?*" whispered Mercedes,

shivering slightly. "That color—what else could it be?"

"It looks mighty like it," admitted Sanford, shaking his head. "But the question is—whose hand print is it? It's a left hand—you can tell that, of course. And somehow it doesn't seem to me like a man's hand. It's not quite big enough—or the right shape. I'd be willing to bet my hat it's old Mrs. Shaw's. But what could have been the matter—and why that one print—and on the floor of all places?"

"Did you notice one other thing?" questioned Mercedes. "The telescope isn't here this morning. It was last night—lying on the floor. I saw it and left it just where it was."

"I saw it too," cried Sanford excitedly, "when I came up here with the C. G.'s afterward. It was lying right over here. They didn't touch it, either. Now what could have become of it? Could it be that it's been taken downstairs and I didn't know it? Let's go through the house again and see if it's been left around there."

They clambered down once more and made another tour of inspection through the deserted

house, but found no telescope in any visible corner of it.

"It's gone—that's all there is to it!" declared Mercedes as they stood staring about the deserted kitchen. "Somebody must have come back and taken it later in the night—and—and left that print of a hand. But—why? Has—has anything dreadful happened, do you think?"

"Beats me!" admitted Sanford, jamming his hands into his pockets and wandering over to stare out of one of the partly shuttered windows. "To tell you the truth, it looks kind of black to me. That print of a hand—in what seems like blood—I don't know——"

Mercedes was suddenly inspired with a new idea. "Tell you what! Let's look around and see if there's any other print we mightn't have seen. Perhaps that isn't the only one. If there are any more, we may be able to tell something else from them." Without even discussing it further, they commenced a fresh tour through the house, glancing swiftly but keenly at every free surface, beginning at the lower floor and gradually working upward. But there was no further sign of a sinister print till they came to the dark and narrow staircase leading up to the

third story. At this point Sanford used his flashlight, which he seemed to carry with him day and night, to illumine the dimly lighted ascent. And just near the top Mercedes, who was following close behind him, uttered a half-smothered little gasp:

"Look here:—down near the step—just over that one next to the top!"

Sanford turned his flashlight down in that direction. On the blue-white plaster of the wall, not far from the wooden surbase, stood out the faint unmistakable prints of five finger tips, likewise in the same sinister dark red!

CHAPTER IV

KENNETH TACKLES THE PROBLEM

KENNETH did not get home from his fishing excursion down the beach till late that evening. It was after nine when he came in, weary and ravenously hungry, for he had taken only a few sandwiches with him for the noon meal. But he had a basket half full of striped bass and was jubilant at his success.

"Hauled in a whopping big sting ray too!" he announced. "And say, but that corker put up *some* fight! He pretty near got me with his tail too, once, and it would have been all up with yours truly if he had. Have to know how to handle those busters or they'll get you."

"Oh, Ken, I hate to have you doing such dangerous things!" shuddered his sister. "Some day you'll get horribly hurt. But come and get your supper now. Mrs. Matson has been keeping it for you."

While he ate, he went on busily recounting

his day's adventures and Mercedes let him talk it out, knowing full well she could not get his undivided attention for other matters till he had. But at last he sat back, content after his meal and quite at the end of his own recital. And it was then that his, "Well, and what have *you* been doing with yourself all day?" brought out his sister's tale of her own involvement with the curious tangle at the Shaw place.

When she had finished Ken sat back, thrust his hands in his pockets, and whistled softly. "I'll say this looks mighty peculiar!" he vouchsafed at last. "What does Captain Matson say about it?"

"Captain Matson's off on liberty for two days. He was gone when Sanford and I got back this morning. Sanford decided not to say anything about it to Mr. Yates, the Number One man, but to wait till his father got back and you and he and I could see if we could dig anything else out of it in the meantime. But I don't like the look of things at all, Ken. Between the old lady's disappearance and that strange cry I heard and these queer-looking finger prints, I'm afraid something awful has happened. What do you think we'd better do?"

Ken thought it over carefully and in silence, balancing a spoon on the edge of his drinking glass the while. Presently he let it fall with a clatter and rendered his decision.

"I think Skinny's right. There's no use getting the whole place stirred up over a matter that may turn out to be nothing out of the way at all—just one of her usual eccentricities. And if the C. G.'s couldn't make anything out of it they'd have to get the local constable from Orrstown down, and maybe the state police—and there'd be the dickens to pay, perhaps all over nothing. No, better wait for the Captain to come back. But I will say that it wouldn't be a bad idea to look into it further—we three. Some things about it do look shady, I'll admit. Tomorrow I'll take the day off and we'll go over the whole thing with a fine comb."

"How about starting in right off—to-night?" suggested his sister. "Sanford was saying that all the queer things about it seem to happen at night. Nothing at all goes on during the day. If you weren't too tired, we might all go over there to-night and just lie low and see what happens —if anything does. Sanford was over about eight and fed the chickens and cow and got

things settled for the night. He said everything was just the same then. He's over at the Station now, but he said he'd be back very soon."

Even as she spoke the screen door opened and Sanford came in, inquiring what luck Ken had had in fishing that day. And there followed ten minutes of enthusiastic and technical description from Ken, little of which was understood by Mercedes. But presently he switched to the subject uppermost in her mind.

"Let's go over to the Shaw place, Skinny. Mercy has been telling me what you two unearthed to-day. Queer bit of work, I'll say! Maybe the circus isn't over yet. I'll take my flashlight and you take yours. Mercy has a little one, too. We'll lie low outside of the house for a little while and see if there's anything going on."

There was a pale streak of afterglow still in the west, over the Bay. They could see it as they came down the lane between the tall huckleberry and scrub cedar bushes. All about them were faint chirpings and rustlings and night noises, and above it all the boom of the surf as the tide rose on the beach beyond the dunes. There was not a light or a sound about the old

Shaw place except the faint mewing of one of the many cats calling a stray kitten back under the house.

They had not flashed on their lights in coming along, and, by common consent, they had been very silent. Now, by whispered arrangement, they circled the place and decided to settle down for their watch on the side steps of the broad veranda, where they would be practically out of sight themselves but could see and hear advantageously.

It was a long vigil and a silent one. They did not dare to exchange many remarks, and when they did, it had to be in so low an undertone that they could scarcely hear one another. Once they thought they detected faint pattering sounds from within the house, but decided in the end that it must be either mice or a rat, and concluded not to go in to investigate. A cottontail rabbit hopped out of the woods on its way to the garden in search of young lettuce, and passing them sitting there immobile, rose up on its haunches and sniffed in their direction suspiciously, but, finding them inert and apparently harmless, went on about its own affairs into the garden. After that a whippoorwill be-

gan to call from a near-by cedar tree. Mercedes counted the calls—forty-nine "whip-poor-wills" without a single cessation, and she felt as if her nerves would snap under the strain if the bird uttered one more call. But he flew away after the fifty-first, and there was deathly quiet following his departure.

Suddenly Sanford sat up straight, leaned over, and touched Ken's knee. *"I hear something inside!"* he hissed. "Rustling—and steps. It isn't mice—this time. Don't turn on your flashlights—yet. I'm going to sneak around to the back door and see if anyone's around."

He slipped noiselessly from the porch steps and disappeared into the darkness. The two waited for his return in breathless silence, straining their eyes into the darkness and listening with every sense alert. But the moments passed and he did not come back. Presently Ken began to grow uneasy.

"I don't like it!" he whispered. "Skinny ought to be back by now. What's keeping him? I think I'll just go and see."

His sister clutched him in wild terror. "And leave me?" she gasped in a whisper. "Don't

you dare, Ken Haynes! I won't stay here one minute alone. If you go, I go too."

"All right. Be quiet and we'll wait a little longer," he conceded. "I suppose I oughtn't to leave you alone. But I wish he'd come back."

They continued to wait, and the silence continued unbroken. What *could* Sanford be doing? After what seemed an untold age, they heard a very faint crunch of footsteps in the sand and Sanford emerged out of the gloom from around the corner of the house.

"Don't make a sound if you can help it," he whispered, "but follow me—quick! There's something I want you to see."

They rose as noiselessly as possible and tiptoed after him till they came to one of the dining-room windows where the shutters were closed, but where some of the slats had dropped out and left apertures wide enough to see through conveniently. Sanford uttered not a word, but ranged them so that they could peer through one of the wider apertures and muttered: "Now watch. Nothing may happen for a few minutes but it will—that is, if it does as it did before."

So they stood, peering into impenetrable

gloom. For a while Mercedes could make out absolutely nothing but an opaque blackness. But presently dim shapes began to stand out in the room—the back of a chair was silhouetted against another window, the heavy bulk of the sideboard against the white wall, a long mass in the center that was the dining table. But there was nothing else. At last Mercedes could stand the suspense no longer.

"What is it, Sanford?" she breathed. "What's the use of standing here?"

"Look!" he hissed fiercely. "Over there—the other side of the table!" She looked where he indicated, and a long shiver shook her from head to foot. A wavering shape, gray, all but invisible, appeared to be hovering behind that table, weaving slowly back and forth, almost as indeterminately as smoke blown in the wind.

Even as they watched, spellbound and cold with terror, the eerie thing vanished as inexplicably as it had appeared. And though they waited and watched for a long time afterwards it did not come back again.

"Come!" whispered Sanford. "It's gone for good now, I guess. Let's go sit down on the steps again." They tiptoed back to the porch

steps and sat there, staring at one another, almost doubting the evidence of their senses.

"Did we really see anything?" demanded Mercedes, the first to break the silence. "Did *you* see it too, Ken?"

"Of course I saw it!" he whispered back a trifle irritably. "Looked mighty spooky, too, but yours truly'll have to see that ghost a little nearer to believe in it. What did you make of it, Skinny?"

"Couldn't make anything of it at all," muttered the younger boy. "I saw it two separate times before I called you, and it was always doing the same thing. Seemed to vanish into nothing each time and appear from nowhere afterward. It's got me, I tell you. I was sure I heard footsteps when I first went around there. But apart from that queer affair there wasn't anything around. And you can't tell me *that* made the footsteps!"

"Where did you see it first?" demanded Ken under his breath.

"I opened the kitchen door and went in. Didn't flash on my light but was just feeling my way around. Then I saw this queer gray-looking thing sort of drifting through the door

into the dining room. It didn't make a sound. I didn't dare to follow it, but ran outside and peeked in through the dining-room window. Then I saw it again. And after that I called you."

Again they sat in silence mulling over the peculiar occurrence. And Mercedes secretly reflected that she had always wanted to have some ghostly or inexplicable experience of this kind, but that, now that she had it, she didn't really relish it at all.

"What shall we do now?" she whispered at last.

"Stay here a little longer and see if anything else happens," decided Ken. "It's too interesting to leave just yet. I want to sift this thing to the bottom."

And so they continued to sit in the darkness. Moments passed. Ten minutes. Twenty. There was little sound now save the constant wash of the breakers on the beach. Once or twice Sanford tiptoed off to reconnoiter at the dining-room window, but came back to report no new developments.

Then, without warning, the stillness of the night was suddenly broken by a weird, unearthly

cry—not loud or piercing, but low, prolonged, and penetrating. And it came singularly enough, not from the direction of the house, but from the barn, which was located two or three hundred yards away and was now almost invisible in the darkness. Mercedes clutched her brother in an agony of real fear, and all of them rose suddenly from their seat on the porch steps.

"By golly!" muttered Ken. "*That's* something real enough, all right! And it came from the barn. Hurry up! We've got to track this thing down now!" Together they sprang down the steps and flew across the garden to the barn—all three flashlights turned on to facilitate their flight.

The big double doors were shut but only latched, and Sanford swung one side open with a single pull. Three flashlights illumined the dusty depths of the old building, bringing into sharp relief the decrepit wagon, the ancient farming implements, the empty stalls. A hurried search revealed the place empty of anything that could possibly have caused the unearthly sound they had heard. Even the loft that had once been a haymow was bare of anything but dust.

They stood by the open door in bewildered uncertainty. "Can you beat it?" cried Ken in sheer exasperation. "Something's causing all this mix-up. What is it? I vote we go back to the house and go in and give the place a thorough once-over. I can't go to bed to-night leaving this Chinese puzzle as it stands. What do you say?"

Half eagerly, half timidly, the others agreed with him, and they closed the barn door and went back to the house. Hesitating no longer, they boldly entered at the front door and made a tour of the entire establishment, even ascending to the tower, where Ken examined with deep interest the finger prints on the floor and wall. But nothing was changed. It was all exactly as it had been earlier in the day. No trace of ghostly visitant revealed itself in any manner, and, thoroughly puzzled, the three returned to the dining room, where they had seen the wraithlike shape through the window.

"Well, this has sure got me buffaloed!" exploded Ken. "Of all the ridiculous——"

But at this point in his tirade Mercedes suddenly pulled him round and pointed to the table.

"There's something different *there,* anyhow!" she cried triumphantly, pointing to it.

"What?" demanded the two boys in one breath, staring at it uncomprehendingly.

"Why, don't you see? *The spectacles!*— They're gone! They're not there any more!"

CHAPTER V

IN THE FOG

IN THE early hours of the morning the sea is a shimmering floor of light, and a seat on one of the bold dunes that flank it a throne from whence all the surrounding sky, sea, and landscape can be surveyed in one wide sweep. Mercedes had seated herself on one of these jutting heights and was contemplating, as from a box seat at the theater, the gyrations of her brother Ken, who was standing up to his knees in the surf, casting a squid with a free and graceful swing of his arms. Every few moments he reeled in his line with tense expectancy. He was reeling it in now, and his sister watched with keen interest, for it was evident from the pull of it that he had hooked something. And, true to her surmise, a flopping, shimmering fish was whirled up on the beach and lay panting under his foot.

"What is it?" she shouted, half rising to go down and view the catch.

"Only another dog-shark!" he called disgustedly. "The fourth this morning. Don't come down. I'm going to throw him back and come up there for a while and rest." He unhooked the dog-shark, hurled him back into the surf, laid his pole aside, and came clambering up the dune to fling himself down beside his sister.

"No luck at all this morning!" he complained. "Those beastly dog-sharks seem to have chased everything else away."

"Well, I'm just as glad," returned Mercedes unsympathetically. "When you have any luck with the fish I can't get in a word edgewise, and I want to talk to you."

"Well, fire away! Now's your chance. I'm going down the beach three or four miles this afternoon. Coast Guards say there are weakfish coming in down there, so you won't see much of me."

"Ken, what do you make of all this business at the Shaw place? It seems so queer to me that last night you were simply wound up with excitement about it, and now—this morning—all you think about is *fishing!*"

"But, you see how it is, Merce," he half apologized, rumpling his thick light hair. "Fishing is

what I came down for. I'm just hipped about fishing. It's the sport I care most about. This other is a side issue—sort of. I really am awfully keen about sifting it down and finding out what it's all about—at night. But, somehow, when daylight comes—I just want to fish!"

He uttered the last in such a wistful tone that his sister could not help but laugh. "Poor old Ken! I understand that, too. But, you see, I don't fish, so I haven't anything else to think about. I hardly slept last night after all the excitement we had. What's your idea about it all, anyhow?"

Kenneth turned over in the warm sand and lay full length, chewing a spear of coarse beach grass. " My ideas on it are about as muddled as yours," he acknowledged, "and I'm pretty well convinced that if something more doesn't happen to-day to clear things up, we'll have to get some outside help on the job. By the way, here's a funny thing! It may not have a thing in the world to do with the old lady's disappearance, but you never can tell. Young Dane—he's Number Four Surfman, you know—just told me that he was coming up the beach last night when he was on patrol, and happened to be walk-

ing along the top of the dunes about a mile and a half farther down, so that he could get a glimpse off toward the Bay. It was pretty late—about one or two this morning, in fact. He said he suddenly saw a light in the window of a tiny little shack down in the hollow halfway between the dunes and the Bay. It seemed odd to him, as he knew positively that old Cushman, the fellow who owns the shack and just uses it once in a while when he comes down to fish, hadn't been near here in many months. So he decided he'd run over and see who could be there. He says he made quite some noise rustling through the bushes as he approached the place, but before he'd got within fifty feet of it the light went out. When he got to the shack it was absolutely dark.

"The door was only latched, but its owner never locks the place anyway. Dane went in and looked about the one tiny little room with his flashlight, but there wasn't a sign of anyone in the hut. The whole thing is only about seven feet by ten, anyway, so he didn't have much to look over. The queerest thing was that there wasn't even a sign that anyone had *been* there—no lamp or candle just extinguished or

anything like that. Yet he declared the light didn't seem like an electric torch—was dimmer and more yellow, like candle or lamplight. And nothing in the shack appeared to have been disturbed. The only thing that seemed to indicate that anyone had been there was some footprints leading up to the door and coming from the direction of the Bay. But the strangest thing of all was that there were no footprints leading *away* from the place. Dane didn't have time to go into the matter any further, as he had to get back on patrol. But, as nothing seemed wrong anywhere, he left and came away. But it's kind of queer—in connection with all the other peculiar things that have happened in the last day or two. If it weren't for the footprints I'd say Dane had just been 'seeing things.' He's a queer, nervous sort of fellow and easily impressed with the uncanniness of the doings we've had around here lately. Think I'll take a look at those footprints myself when I go down this afternoon."

Mercedes suddenly put her hand on her brother's shoulder and exclaimed, in a voice half pleading, half determined, "Ken, do something for me, won't you? Take me with you

this afternoon. I won't interfere with your fishing. And I can walk back alone afterward along the beach if you want to go on farther. I can't sit around here all the time by myself, and I'd enjoy the walk. And I do so want to see if we can make head or tail out of this queer business."

"All right," Ken conceded. "You might take your rod and a couple of squids, anyway, and learn how to make a decent cast. We'll ask Sanford to go too, if he's home for dinner, and you can come back with him if you get tired. He's been in on this so much that it'd be too bad to leave him out. But don't count on unearthing any more clues. I kind of think Dane may have been unconsciously romancing a bit. Now I'm going back to try another cast or two a little farther up the beach. Come along and I'll give you your first lesson. But I warn you, if you get my line snarled it'll be your last!"

When it came time to go down the beach in the afternoon, the weather had turned cloudy and damp and a fog was drifting in from the ocean. Nevertheless, the three (for Sanford had gladly elected to join the party) decided that weather need be no bar to their expedition,

dressed accordingly, and set forth armed with rods, reels, and squids, and a pocket flashlight apiece. Sanford had reported that he had been over at the Shaw place during the morning to tend to the cow and chickens and feed the cats and had seen no new evidence of the rightful resident having been in the vicinity. He had given particular attention to the dining room and kitchen, where the curious phenomenon of the night before had been witnessed. The only possible item of interest that he had found had been a few shreds of gray woolen thread of some kind hanging or caught on a nail in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room about on a level with his shoulder. These might have been freshly caught there at a recent date, or might have been there all along. They were so inconspicuous that one wouldn't notice them except under the unusual conditions of hunting for suggestive clues.

Kenneth took the threads from the paper in which Sanford had wrapped them, and examined them closely. "Did you ever see the old lady wearing anything that looked like these, Skinny?" he asked.

"Well, she has an old gray shawl that she

usually wears around outside when the weather's chilly," said Sanford doubtfully. "These might be from it—I can't tell. She always kept the shawl hanging up on the kitchen door. But it wasn't there this morning, because I happened to notice, going by. And after I'd fed the animals, I rambled around the house a bit, just to look things over. And the shawl wasn't anywhere about, so she must have it with her."

"We'll keep it in mind, anyway," Ken nodded, and they continued to plow their way through the sand almost at the edge of the tide, which was high. Mercedes became rather weary with the unaccustomed exercise of plodding through the shifting sand, but she would not have acknowledged it to her two companions for the world, and as they neared old Cushman's shack her curiosity overcame all feelings of fatigue. At a certain spot marked by the half-buried capstan of some old wrecked vessel her companions steered her up over the dunes and down behind them through a thick growth of bay and scrub cedar to a tiny inconspicuous hut huddled in the hollow.

As they climbed down the west side of the dune the fog, which had been growing per-

ceptibly thicker as they proceeded down the beach, suddenly shut in on them and blotted the surrounding landscape almost entirely from sight.

"I don't like this!" declared Ken, pushing his way through the bushes after Sanford. "Keep close to us, Merce. This is the kind of thing to get hopelessly lost in. I wish we hadn't come to-day."

"Hush!—what's that?" hissed Sanford, suddenly halting the procession with arms outstretched. "Did you hear that rustling through the bushes—and a sound like someone running?"

They hadn't, but took his word for it, and halted for a consultation. "I thought first it was some animal—a dog, perhaps," Sanford whispered. "But the steps weren't like an animal, more like a person that was running. You can't even see the shack from here for the fog. I bet someone heard us coming and is trying to get out of the way!"

"I don't like this a little bit!" again declared Ken. "Don't mind for myself, but I hate to think there's any danger for you, Merce!"

Mercedes didn't exactly like it for herself,

but she hated to say so, just when the adventure was becoming so thrilling. So she assured the boys—somewhat quaveringly—that she wasn't in the least afraid and much preferred to go on than to go back. And so they proceeded in a fog-blanketed silence, till they suddenly found themselves at the door of the shack. It was standing wide open!

"Humph! this is queer!" ejaculated Ken. "I'll bet Dane didn't leave it that way last night—he's too methodical—wouldn't you say so, Skinny?" Sanford replied only wih a nod, and flashed his light around inside the deserted shack. "No one here now, anyhow. Let's go in," was his only comment. And the three tiptoed gingerly into the hut, which was scarcely big enough to hold them all at one time.

"Someone's been sitting on that bed!" cried Sanford suddenly, pointing to a sagging cot in one corner, covered by a piece of old canvas. There was no doubt about it. At a point near the foot, the canvas was rumpled and half dragged off, undoubtedly the work of someone who had been sitting there for an interval.

"Sounds like 'The Three Bears'!" giggled Mercedes hysterically. "Perhaps it was Dane."

"He didn't sit down—I'm certain of it, from what he told me," asserted Ken. "Didn't have time, anyway. No, sir!—someone's been here since, all right. Look here!—here's a burned match on the floor." While he picked it up and examined it, Sanford had gone over to the little window and was casting his flashlight on a small round spot no bigger than a silver dollar on the wooden floor just below the window sill. Suddenly he got down on his knees and smelt it, much to Mercedes's amusement.

After a moment he stood up and pointed to it suggestively.

"*Kerosene*—and fresh at that!" he remarked briefly. "Now, I wonder how it came here?" Ken was suddenly inspired with an idea.

"You two wait in here a moment. I'm going outside to look around." And he disappeared into the blanket of fog beyond the door. It was not long, however, before he was back. "Well, I have the explanation of *one* thing, anyway!" he announced exultantly. "You remember Dane said there were footsteps leading up *to* the door, last night, but none leading away from it? Very good reason. The party didn't leave by the door at all, but got out the *win-*

dow! There are footsteps all around underneath that one over there by the foot of the cot. And I think I have the explanation of something else, too. Whoever was in here had a light, but it wasn't a flashlight nor a candle nor a lamp. It was a *lantern!* That would explain the spot of oil below the window, perhaps. It may have been spilled by the lantern being tilted in getting out of the window. It would explain, too, why there was no sign of any light left in here when Dane came in. And one other thing. There's a round impression in the sand just outside that window as if something had been set down there. Could easily be made by the base of a lantern."

Immediately they all dashed outside to see for themselves the results of Kenneth's exploration. A short distance away from the window, thick bushes crowded close. And into these the footsteps disappeared, and, the fog growing thicker than ever, it was useless to try to trace them any farther.

"Anyway," hazarded Sanford, "whoever it was probably just hid in those bushes till Dane disappeared, and then came back later—or went on elsewhere. But here's another thing. Old

Mrs. Shaw has a lantern and always carries it around at night—at least, when she's out puttering about the chicken yard. It has a base just about the size of that print in the sand. I never thought to look and see whether it was missing, back at her place."

It was Mercy, who had been carefully examining the window ledge while Sanford had been speaking, who gave them the next shock. "Look here!" she cried, and pointed to a splintered place in the boarding. And, at her indicated spot, Sanford extracted from a crack in that boarding three fuzzy gray pieces of thread or yarn, identical in color and texture with those he had salvaged from the nail at Windy Hollow!

And while they were still marveling over this there came a sudden crash from the bushes that startled them all beyond any power of speech!

CHAPTER VI

ENTER NUMBER FIVE SURFMAN

THE three in the hut were struck motionless with horrified amazement. And they listened for several tense moments, without moving a muscle, for a repetition of the sound. But there was no repetition. The only thing that broke the fogbound silence was the dripping of moisture from the eaves of the little hut, and the boom of the distant surf.

"Oh, Ken," whispered Mercedes, "what *could* that have been?"

"I'm sure I don't know, but I'm going straight out to see!" announced her brother with determination. "Skinny, you stay in here with Mercy while I go out and reconnoiter. This is getting entirely too thick!"

"No, you stay here with your sister and let me go," decided Sanford. "I know the ground around here much better than you do, and I'll be able to make more progress and quicker

time!" And he was out of the shack before there could be any further argument about it. And while he was gone Kenneth directed his sister to watch carefully by the door while he took the post at the window, in order that no movement of the game should escape them directly in their vicinity during Sanford's absence.

Muffled by the fog, the pounding of the surf came to them across the dunes as they waited in the dim light of the waning afternoon. The world and all its activities seemed curiously remote in the deserted spot, and almost anything of an uncanny nature seemed possible, shut in as they were by gray and drenching mist. Neither of them spoke. Mercedes felt that if the deathlike silence continued much longer she would be obliged to scream, for the sheer relief of making some human racket.

Suddenly, however, it was broken by the sound of crashing through the bushes, and before the two in the hut could draw their breath a figure came hurtling out of the mist and made a bee line for the door of the hut. At the first glimpse of it, Mercedes had unconsciously withdrawn into the shelter back of the doorway, and the figure hurled itself through this doorway

and fell panting into a decrepit steamer chair near the wall. Too astounded for any speech, the pair in the hut stared at the intruder, who, after an interval, stared back at them in as frank an amazement.

"*You?*" exclaimed the astonished Kenneth. "For the cat's sake, Bennie, what's the meaning of all this?" And for Mercy's enlightenment he continued:

"This is Bennie Morris, Number Five Surfman, up at the Coast Guard. Don't know whether you've met my sister, Bennie, but I sure would appreciate it if you'd explain the mystery!"

It would be hard to describe adequately the shamefaced confusion and embarrassment of Bennie. And mingled with it all were a very patent alarm and hysteria that he tried to hide but failed.

"Why, I—I——" he stammered, then demanded suddenly, "Who *is* that prowling around in the bushes outside? Anyone who came with you?"

"Why, it's Skinny!" laughed Ken. "Didn't you see us when we first came along? You sure did give *us* a scare!"

"Well, it's nothing to what you gave *me!*" stuttered Bennie, mopping his face with a handkerchief. "I—I thought you——" He hesitated. "Oh, well, never mind now what I thought!"

"You thought we were Anne Shaw, now, didn't you?" shrewdly surmised Kenneth. And the young fellow in the chair nodded a miserable assent. At this moment Sanford himself returned and was properly astonished to behold the newest arrival at the shack.

"What in blue blazes are *you* doing here?" he demanded. "You know darned well you're on duty this afternoon in the tower watch. And were you the one who was scuttling through the bushes just now like a scared rabbit?"

A dull red mounted into the face of Bennie, and his rather pleasant blue eyes flamed with hostility and resentment. Rising out of the steamer chair, he faced Sanford Matson.

"You're mistaken," he retorted with what dignity he could muster. "It *was* my tower watch, but I got Hemingway to take it and relieve me because I had a bad toothache. Mr. Yates knows all about it. I went up to Orrstown to have the tooth out, and then, as I had liberty the rest of the afternoon, I hiked down here and

prowled around a bit, because I'd heard what Dane reported this morning and I wanted to see if I could find out what was doing."

The explanation seemed to satisfy everyone but Sanford. "Well, it's mighty peculiar," he countered, "if that's the case, that you should be so blamed scary about the thing and sneak off like that when you heard us coming. It was you, wasn't it, that was in the hut when we came along first?" Again Bennie nodded. "Can't understand it," continued Sanford. "You aren't by any chance *afraid* of meeting Anne Shaw, are you?"

"Well, how about *you?*" Bennie came back at him hotly. "You ain't so crazy to meet the old lady face to face, after all that's happened, are you?" And at this point Kenneth came to the rescue of the unhappy young Coast Guardsman. "Here, Skinny, have a heart! Benny hasn't done anything so criminal that I can see. Don't blame him for being a bit edgy. Feel that way myself and don't know as I'd particularly care to meet the ghostly old lady alone in this fog, either. Didn't see any signs of her around, did you, Bennie?"

The young fellow turned a relieved face to-

ward Kenneth. "No—I—I didn't see a thing that—that looked like she'd been here. I was in the hut when I heard you folks coming along. I—I thought maybe it was—was her, and I didn't want her to find me here, so I beat it out by the window and got into the bushes. That first crash you heard was me—I broke a rotten branch I was leaning against, and it came down with a smash. Then I heard someone tearing around in the underbrush, and I beat it back to the hut again. I didn't dream that you——"

"Well, it's all right, I guess," interrupted Sanford. By virtue of his father being Captain, all the young Coast Guardsmen rather kowtowed to him, so Mercedes was to discover later. "Guess we'd better be beating it along back, all of us. This fog's getting thicker by the minute. Coming along, Bennie?"

The Number Five Surfman seemed to hesitate. "I was going to wait and see——" he began and then, apparently changed his mind with some abruptness. "No, I reckon I will go along with you-all. Old Yates will be looking for me soon. I swapped tricks with Hemingway and go on at five."

The four of them filed solemnly out of the

hut, Sanford coming last and closing the door carefully behind him. Single file, they proceeded along the narrow pathway through the scrub growth and sedge, across the dunes to the beach. The tide was falling by that time and they could walk with somewhat more ease along the edge of the surf which came booming in mysteriously out of the fog. Almost unconsciously they paired off, Kenneth going ahead with Bennie, and Sanford and Mercedes plodding some distance behind. Under cover of the distance and the roar of the surf, Sanford turned to the girl at his side and exclaimed rather savagely:

"I don't get that Bennie—never did! There's something mighty queer about the way he was acting to-day."

"I don't see anything so very queer," retorted Mercy. "He's rather the scary, timid sort, I should say, and we frightened him as much as he did us. I think you're rather hard on him. He seems a nice, quiet sort of fellow."

"You don't understand," explained Sanford patiently. "This isn't the first time, by any means, that he's done a queer sort of trick like getting off from duty that way with some trumped-up excuse. He's bothering Dad and

Mr. Yates all the time in some such way. If it isn't one excuse it's another. And the funny thing is that I've noticed he usually ends up in the region of the Shaw place, no matter where else he says his business takes him. He has sometimes gone over to take old Anne Shaw her mail —what little she gets—or help her find the cow when it's strayed off, or patch up a leaky chicken house—that kind of thing. I used to be always the one to do those chores for her till he came along, but lately he's been so attentive I haven't had much to do. But he does it all in an odd sort of way—never as if he really intended to do the thing, but as if it had come about accidentally, if you know what I mean. It's struck me queer a number of times, but I never really gave it any serious thought till to-day. I was downright *mad* to find him hanging round there when he ought to have been on tower watch."

They tramped along for a space in silence, Mercy mulling over the rather startling new ideas that Sanford had just been expounding. Suddenly she grabbed his arm, inspired by another idea.

"Sanford, do you suppose it could have been Bennie here at the hut last night when Dane

saw that light? Why couldn't it have been? There seems to be some strange attraction for him about the place."

But Sanford shook his head. "No, that's easy. Bennie was in bed and asleep when all that happened last night. I can prove it by asking Mr. Yates. But there's no telling, he *may* have been prowling around the Shaw place when some of those other things happened. And I'm going to prove that too, by looking up the record at the Station and asking a few questions when I get back. It all has a queer look, to me."

They said no more on the subject, and presently put on an extra spurt and caught up with the others, the four of them walking the rest of the way almost abreast, and talking on desultory subjects, or plodding along in silence. The drenching and depressing fog somehow did not make for cheerful conversation, and all were puzzled and perplexed in their different ways. At the Coast Guard Station Bennie left them and went in, the other three pursuing their way to the Matson cottage.

Captain Matson had not yet returned from liberty, and after supper Mercedes was again left with Mrs. Matson while Ken and Sanford

went over to the Station for a while. Mercy sat with Mrs. Matson, reading by the kerosene student lamp on the center table in the tiny living room. Outside, the boom of the breakers was interrupted only by the occasional weird sound of a foghorn on some passing steamer and the steady drip of moisture from the eaves of the cottage. Mercedes did not try to discuss the events of the afternoon with Mrs. Matson, for she felt there was more to it than she cared to explain at the time, and the Captain's wife seemed quite absorbed in a new magazine she had just received in the evening mail. But Mercy herself could not seem to concentrate her mind on her book and kept listening with strained alertness for the return of the two boys.

At last they came in, slamming the screen door and shaking the moisture from their slickers. She noticed at once a peculiar and suppressed excitement in their manner. It was Kenneth who, after fidgeting around the room a bit, came over to her and suggested:

"It's a queer night, Merce. Feel like coming out on the beach a bit and taking a look at the ocean in the fog? You don't see it like this very often, and it's rather worth looking at. Better

wrap up well in your slickers if you do come. It's messy as the dickens!"

Sensing something back of this apparently innocent suggestion, Mercedes sprang up with alacrity and went to don her slickers in the face of Mrs. Matson's protests that it was a wretched night to be out and Kenneth must be crazy to suggest it. Once outside the house, they found Sanford waiting around, and he joined them without even a remark. But, to Mercy's complete surprise, the two boys began to steer her, not toward the path across the dunes, but quite the opposite direction. And to her wondering protests Kenneth only replied in a hushed undertone:

"Keep perfectly quiet and don't waste your breath saying a word or asking any questions. There are some queer doings going on over at the Shaw place. We thought you'd like to be in on this, so we're taking you along. Something's up there to-night, all right, and we're going to see what it is or I'll eat my fishing tackle!"

CHAPTER VII

THE GRAY SHAWL

IT WAS a silent journey through the lane. Boiling with suppressed curiosity, Mercedes did not, however, dare to disobey her brother's command for absolute silence. But, much to her astonishment, they did not turn in at the gate as she had supposed they would, but steered her along past the gate on the path toward the Bay.

"Why, I thought——" she could not refrain from whispering, but Ken silenced her peremptorily with a nudge of the elbow and suddenly propelled her into the bushes at the left of the path.

"Bend down and crawl in there!" he muttered. "And don't make any more rustling sound than you can help." Behind a thin screen of shrubbery that hid them from the path they whispered Mercedes to drop to her knees and look up toward the cupola of the Shaw house. This she did, but seeing nothing unusual about

it demanded under her breath what she was to look for.

"Stop talking and just watch," commanded Ken. "You'll see something in a minute."

The fog which had blanketed them thickly on the ocean front was thinner here, though still dense enough to hide the lower part of the Shaw place pretty thoroughly from view. But the cupola stood out, veiled only in a thin mist. And for an appreciable interval it so remained, while the three in the bushes stared at it and held their breath. Suddenly Sanford and Kenneth simultaneously clutched the arm of the girl crouching between them and hissed:

"Look!—*quick!*" The windows of the cupola were illumined, not with a brilliant light, but with a faint subdued glow, as if lighted from within by some feeble or partly concealed light. At first it wavered and flickered, then remained steady for an interval that seemed to the watchers as long as ten minutes but was probably no greater than two. Then it wavered again, grew fainter and fainter, and at length disappeared altogether. Not till the mist-shrouded tower had returned to its original darkness and remained so for a number of mo-

ments did any of the three so much as draw an ordinary breath. Then it was Sanford who whispered excitedly:

"That's the second time to-night that we've seen the same thing, and I'd like to know what in Sam Hill it all means!"

"As near as I can figure it," commented the less excitable Kenneth, "someone has come up those tower stairs with some fairly dim light, probably either a candle or a lantern—more likely a lantern—and set it down on the floor below the level of the windows. That would account for the wavering at first, coming up the stairs, and the steadiness afterward when it sat on the floor. Then it was taken up again and carried away. What puzzles me, though, is where the person was who must have been up there. We ought to have had a glimpse, or at least a silhouette, of whoever it was against the window. Must have kept down below the sill all the time for some unknown reason."

"Well, *one* thing's certain," exploded Sanford, "there's someone in that place *this* time. No question about *that!* Now, what are we going to do about it?"

"Oh, don't do anything—just for a minute!"

implored Mercy. "Here's something *I* want to know—if someone is around that house with a light, why can't we see it from some of the lower windows? None of them have curtains and most of them haven't even shades, and the shutters aren't all closed either."

"Because of the fog, you goose!" returned Ken impatiently. "It's a heap thicker, the lower down you get. But we're wasting time hanging around here now. I propose that we just rush out and raid the place. Go softly till we get in and locate the intruder, and then we'll close in and prevent any escape."

"But wait up!" exclaimed Sanford. "If it's old Mrs. Shaw herself what are we going to do? It may just as likely be she, and she has a perfect right to be in her own house."

"If it's Mrs. Shaw we'll simply say we've been watching the place for her while she was away," decided Kenneth. "She ought to be grateful to us for that. We'll make her understand there've been some rather queer goings on around here, and she ought to be delighted that we've been so thoughtful.'

"Well, I suppose that's so," conceded Sanford doubtfully, "but you never can tell how

she'll act. Anyhow, we'd better go right now."

With Mercedes between them, they crept out of the bushes, down the path and in the gateway, and up onto the veranda.

"Tell you what," suggested Sanford, "you and Mercy go in the front door and I'll slip around and go in the kitchen one, and that ought to prevent anyone slipping out before we can see who it is. Have your flashlights ready, but don't turn them on till you're sure you'll need them."

He left them and felt his way carefully around to the side and back of the house through the fog, and, none too confidently they entered the hall door together.

"Keep close to me, Merce," whispered Ken, "and don't turn on your flashlight till I say so. We'll catch whoever it is red-handed if we go carefully. *Look out!*"

He stumbled over something lying at his feet in the black hallway leading to the dining room, stepped backward, and threw his weight against Mercedes, who was right behind him.

"Flashlights!" he commanded in a hoarse whisper, and both of them snapped on simultaneously. The glare illuminated an old gray shawl

lying in the hallway, almost under their feet!

"Great snakes!" exclaimed Ken, kicking at it doubtfully where it lay, "*here's* something new anyway! Just dropped, too, or I miss my guess!"

"Oh, Ken, let's get right out of here!" pleaded Mercedes. "It belongs to old Mrs. Shaw, and she must have come back again. We haven't any business here now."

"Go away *now?*—not on your life!" declared Ken. "The shawl may be the old lady's, but I shan't believe she's back till I actually *see* her. I'm going right on to the kitchen." He turned off the flashlight, and his sister did the same, and they proceeded cautiously through the blackness of the dining room to the kitchen door.

"Skinny's probably holding the fort at the other door," muttered Ken as he pushed open the half-closed door to the kitchen. And they fully expected to see the other boy guarding the room with his flashlight on. But the place was in darkness, and there seemed absolutely no sign of Sanford. The silence and darkness puzzled the two who had just entered, and they stood by the door uncertainly. Suddenly Mercedes clutched her brother's arm and whispered distractedly:

"Ken—come away!—*please do*! There's something queer here. I just feel it. Something or someone's in this room."

"Nonsense!" growled her brother. "You just imagine——" But he stopped short before finishing the sentence, darted away from her side, and before she realized what was happening, there came the sound of scuffling and struggling from the center of the kitchen floor.

Astonishment and fright kept Mercedes rigidly motionless for one terrified moment; then enough command of herself returned to enable her to flash on her light. The illumination revealed her brother wrestling madly in the center of the kitchen floor with the equally tense and desperate figure of Sanford Matson. Both young fellows gasped and fell away, sheepishly regarding each other for a bewildered moment. Kenneth was first to recover his poise.

"I—I thought I had someone, sure, Skinny. Sorry I mussed you up," he panted. "Just saw a dim shape sneaking out from behind something and didn't even have time to flash on my light. Was afraid he'd get away before I grabbed him."

"Same here!" muttered Sanford. "Of course,

I didn't realize it was you folks, though I might have known you'd come through this way. But I had a good reason to keep in the dark. There *is* someone prowling around here. I think whoever it is sneaked up those back stairs. When I first came in the kitchen door from outside I heard something or someone in here, moving around in the dark. But the minute after, whatever it was had disappeared somewhere, and, from the position I was in, it couldn't have gone out the door to the dining room. Must have sneaked up those back stairs. It's the only other way to get out of here. What'll we do now?"

"There's only one thing to do," decided Ken, "and that is to find out who went upstairs and where they went. I suggest that you and Mercy stay right here and guard the foot of these stairs, and I'll go up the front ones and see if I can figure out what's up in that region. Be sure to yell good and loud if anyone tries to come down this way. I'm certain it can't be the old lady prowling around in this fashion. She'd most likely have a light and act as if the place belonged to her. Keep your lights on now, or we may be banging away again at each other in the dark!"

He switched on his own and made for the door, leaving them in the dim old kitchen. As there was nothing to do but watch the stairs, each found a chair and sat down to wait for Ken to come back.

"Did you know that we stumbled over a gray shawl lying out there in the hall?" whispered Mercy.

"You *did?*" almost shouted Sanford. "That's the old lady's shawl, then. And out in the hall, you say? She surely must have come back, if that's the case, for that shawl's been missing ever since she's been gone."

"I believe I'll go out and get it and bring it in here," suggested Mercedes. "Then you can see if it's the same one."

"Better leave it where it is," Sanford countered. "When we have time we'll examine it and see by the way it lies how it was dropped and perhaps why, and I can tell then whether it belongs to her. But, say! Ken's gone a long while. Wonder why he doesn't come back?"

He was gone longer still before they heard or saw a sign of his return. Moment after moment they waited, impatience and anxiety growing with every passing instant. Nor was there

any sound of his footsteps moving about on the floor above. Mercy began to fidget uneasily and Sanford to mutter, "Wish he'd come!" every other moment. He had just about decided to suggest that they go up after the missing member when Ken himself appeared, coming down the back stairs and flashing his light ahead of him.

"Gracious! What a scare you gave us!" moaned Mercy. "We thought you were never coming back."

"Didn't realize I was so long," Ken remarked. "I did a good bit of prowling about up there, and I'm convinced of one thing: the bird has flown, whoever he—or she—may be!"

"But when could he have got out? We've been here all the time, and he must have been here when we came in," exploded Sanford.

"Search me!" inelegantly responded Ken. "Possibly flew the coop when we were wrestling together in here in the dark. That's about the only time anyone *could* have vamoosed without our seeing who it was."

"I want Sanford to see that old shawl lying out in the hall," suddenly announced Mercedes. "He said we might be able to tell something

about what happened by the way it was lying there."

The three of them made for the hall door and focused their flashlights on the dark hall that stretched through to the front entrance. Then they turned to look at one another with wildly questioning eyes. There was no vestige of what they sought in the entire length of the passageway!

CHAPTER VIII

CAPTAIN MATSON IS PUZZLED

"I SAY," cried Ken, turning to his companions, "if you two are trying to play a trick on me, cut it out! This is too serious a matter to fool with. I *saw* that shawl there myself—and felt it, too—got my feet all tangled up in it in the dark—and now it's missing. If you've hidden it just to play a trick on me, produce it. There oughtn't to be any delay here."

"Of course we didn't hide it," protested his sister indignantly. "I even wanted to bring it in and show it to Sanford while you were gone, and he said no, let it alone till we could all look at it together. We had nothing whatever to do with it."

"Well, where under the canopy could it have got to, then?" demanded her brother, staring incredulously at the spot where it had lain.

"Bet I know what happened!" ventured San-

ford. "Whoever was in here heard us coming up on the veranda, and they beat it into the kitchen, dropping the shawl accidentally in the hall as they ran along. Then I came around to the back door and scared them up the kitchen stairs to the floor above. And while we were both having that mix-up in the kitchen and making something of a racket they sneaked down the front stairs, grabbed the shawl, and beat it out the front door. How about it?"

"Probably just about what happened," acknowledged Kenneth after thinking it over. "And if that's the case, they're off for good, no doubt, and we've scared them away from here for a while. Wonder what we'd better do next?"

"Ken," suddenly interrupted Mercedes, "you were away an awfully long time upstairs. What were you doing? Did you discover anything interesting?"

"Oh, yes! In the excitement of all this I forgot to tell you. I prowled about rather carefully through all the rooms but didn't see anybody —naturally, since they'd gotten away before ever I started upstairs. There was nothing to see on the second or third floors, so I went on up to the cupola, which was the place I was

most anxious to get to, anyway. I stood there quite a while in the dark, looking out all around as far as I could see, and even using my binoculars. Was glad I'd kept them with me to-night. But the fog was too thick, and even those night glasses weren't a bit of use, so presently I gave that up and flashed my light around that cupola space to see if I could discover what was the reason for that light up there before we came in. You'd better both come up with me now and see for yourselves what's there."

They were nothing loath to accept the invitation, and trailed after him up the two pairs of stairs to the cupola ladder. But before they ascended the ladder Ken turned his light down to the floor at its foot.

"Look there!" he indicated, pointing it to something lying on the floor in a dark little heap.

"What is it?" Mercedes demanded, pushing at it with her foot rather gingerly.

"Pick it up," Kenneth commanded.

"Ugh! I don't want to!" she demurred, and Sanford stooped down and took it up in two fingers.

"Why—it's just an old piece of cloth and it's

all wet!" he exclaimed. "How'd it come here, anyway—and why?"

"Come up to the cupola now," said Ken, "and you'll find out." Sanford dropped the wet rag and they proceeded up the ladder.

"Now," went on Ken, when the three had crowded into the cramped space, "move aside a little, Merce, and look down where I throw the spotlight." Mercedes shifted farther toward the window, and Ken turned his flashlight on the spot of floor just in front of him. "See anything interesting there?"

"Why—why—there's a damp spot there," stuttered Mercy. "just as if someone had been rubbing it with a wet cloth or—— Oh! I know what happened—they were washing out that hand print! That's where it was. *It's gone!*"

"Right you are," declared her brother. "Exactly what I figured out. They came up here first with a lantern and saw the spot—or looked for it—or something. That was the first time we saw the light. Then they went downstairs, got the wet rag, came back, and scrubbed it out. That would explain why we only saw a dim light and no sign of anyone. They set the light on the floor and they themselves probably stood

on the upper step of the ladder and did the scrubbing. Then they must have heard us coming up on the veranda, got frightened, dropped the rag, and beat it down. Naturally they wouldn't want to be caught up here."

"Do you realize—this looks mighty shady—for someone?" interrupted Sanford. "Anyone who's worried enough about those finger prints to come up in the night and wash them out must have a darned guilty conscience! Wonder if it could have been the old lady?"

"Looks like it, since they were going around with a gray shawl. That could hardly belong to anyone else," Ken offered.

Suddenly Mercedes was inspired with an idea.

"There were the other finger prints—don't you remember? The ones on the stairs just below here. Wonder if they washed those out too? Let's go see!"

They all rushed down to inspect the other set. On the wall near the upper step Kenneth turned his flashlight—and the prints stood out dimly, as they had before, evidently untouched by the obliterating rag.

"Now, that's queer!" muttered Sanford.

"Why should they take so much trouble to wipe out one set and leave the other?"

"Not so strange," Kenneth replied. "Either we interrupted them before they were finished, and they didn't have time, or they didn't realize the prints were there. These are fainter and in a rather inconspicuous place. If we were finger-print experts, now, we could go a long way toward unraveling this tangle with what we've got here, I reckon."

Mercy, who had been regarding the prints silently and intently while the others were talking, suddenly exclaimed:

"Well, I may not be a finger-print expert, but there's one thing I can see pretty plainly: whoever made those prints had something the matter with that thumb. Look at it! What's the meaning of that spot right in the middle of the print? No little lines or curlicues in it at all. Just a sort of mark like a cross."

"Looks as if they had a scar in the thumb. If we could find out who had a thumb like that, we'd be on Easy Street, as far as getting at who's been up to all these queer tricks," ventured Sanford. "Bet it's Anne Shaw herself.

Though how we're ever going to find that out beats me!'"

"We might examine some of the things in the kitchen downstairs that she has been probably used to handling," suggested Mercedes.

"Look here! We're just wasting time over this sort of thing," declared Kenneth. "Someone's been in here to-night who hasn't any business here—I'm convinced of that. Anne Shaw herself wouldn't go sneaking around her own house that way—you can't tell *me!* She'd be in here acting as if she belonged here. I'd be willing to bet she hasn't been near the place—to-night, anyway. What we've got to do is find out who *has* been here—if we can—and why. Whoever it was insists on carrying around a gray shawl and is deeply interested in getting those finger prints wiped out. That's about all we have to go on at present. I've a kind of a new theory about it, and I think we'd better go over home now. Sanford, you and I will go over to the Station and look into things there, and Mercedes, you'd better go to bed. It's late as the dickens, and Mrs. Matson'll be worried about you."

His decision was somehow a "slump" to Mer-

cedes, who had been keyed up to an intense pitch of excitement by their recent experiences.

"That's just like you, Ken!" she complained. "Just when things are getting most exciting I have to drop out of it and you and the others can go ahead and work it all out while I go home and go to bed. I think it's kind of mean. Mrs. Matson will probably be in bed herself by this time, so what difference can it possibly make if I stay up a little longer with you?"

Kenneth, while realizing his sister's disappointment, was somewhat annoyed at her persistence. "Oh, heck!" he groaned. "Don't you realize, Merce, that the lights go out in the mess room at the Station at nine, and after that outsiders, especially women or girls, are supposed to keep out? I go in because I'm almost like one of the boys, and the Captain has never objected. But it simply wouldn't do for you."

His argument was unanswerable, and Mercedes could only murmur, "All right, then," and trail along after the two, flashing on her torch as they left the uncanny old house. On the front veranda they preceded her down the steps, talking busily together in a low tone. Neither of them noticed that she stooped down before

descending the steps, picked up some small and inconspicuous object, and dropped it in the pocket of her sweater. They went single file through the lane, behind whose high hedge of bushes an owl was somewhere hooting dismally, and emerged at the Coast Guard Station.

"Hello!" exclaimed Sanford. "Dad must be back. I see him sitting at his desk in his office back there—at least, I see the top of his head!"

They had to pass directly by the window of the little back office where the Captain sat writing up his records. "Hi, Dad!" called his son. "You back from liberty? Can we come in a minute?"

The Captain looked up, greeted them with a wave of his hand, and replied:

"Yes, come in—all of you. Miss Mercedes too, if you aren't too tired. What in Sam Hill you doing, out prowling around so late?"

They entered the little office by the back door, Mercedes grinning triumphantly at her brother as they passed in. The Captain went out and brought back chairs for Mercedes and Kenneth, and Sanford perched on his desk.

"Well," he began, "what's new these two days? How's fishin', Ken? Seen anything of old

lady Shaw, Miss Mercy? I hear the old girl isn't back yet! She sure is putting up a good one, this time!"

"We were over there to-night, Dad, and some pretty queer things have been happening. Mercy and Ken and I want to talk to you about them," interrupted Sanford excitedly.

"Well, fire away!" said the Captain. "But don't be too long about it. I got all these back records to write up. Yates is on tower watch and Bennie Morris ought to be getting back from patrol. If he's late again to-night I've a mind to cut his next liberty. His record's getting rotten. That's one thing I'm waiting up for."

Sanford began to give his father an account of the evening and was interrupted by Kenneth, who went back to the adventure of the afternoon and a sketch of the night before, when they had kept vigil outside of Windy Hollow. When they had brought the record of the two days up to date the Captain sat tilted back in his chair and scratched his head in deep thought. Then he took down one of the Station books and shuffled its pages, passing his finger care-

fully down the length of several of its record sheets.

"Beats everything!" he mused aloud. "Whatever Anne Shaw is up to, it 'ud take a bureau of detectives to figure. But if Bennie Morris is mixed up in it in any way, I'll find out how and why, switch me if I don't. He's missed punching his time clocks on patrol three times in the last two days, and he's late darned nigh every time he comes in. And that ain't all, either. Yesterday he complained of a bad toothache and got Yates to give him liberty to go up to Orrstown and have it out, but he never went near the dentist. I called up to-night and found out about that. Dentist never see hide nor hair of him. Blamed if I don't bawl him out good and proper when he gets back! He——"

At that moment the screen door to the little office opened and Bennie Morris himself walked in. His hair was damp with the perspiration and mist, and he was panting as if he had been running. At the door he paused, startled evidently at seeing who were occupying the office with the Captain. Something touched Mercedes's heart at the look of misery in his face.

"Well, look-a here——" the Captain began,

evidently about to launch into the long-planned "bawling out," but Mercedes touched his arm and interrupted:

"I think I'd better be getting back to the house and to bed, Captain Matson. If you'll excuse me now, I'll say good-night. Coming, Ken?"

As he felt he ought to take his sister back to the house, Kenneth had no choice but to take his departure also, which he did with evident reluctance. Outside the Station he whispered disgustedly:

"Why couldn't you have waited a few minutes, anyhow? You were so darned anxious to get in there to-night, and then you up and decided to leave just at the most interesting moment. I call that blamed contrary!"

"Oh, Ken! there was something in his face that I just couldn't bear the look of—I don't know why. He was absolutely in agony—I could see that. And it wasn't just because the Captain was going to call him down in front of us. It was something more serious. I just felt that if it would help him any to have us come away I'd be glad to do it—mystery or no mystery."

Kenneth surveyed his sister with utter scorn.

"Well, you certainly are the limit. That fellow Bennie is about as yellow as they make 'em, and he doesn't deserve one bit of sympathy. He's acted shady ever since he's been here, and everybody knows it. I'm surprised that *you'd* champion him."

"We don't know all the different sides of it, Ken," she pleaded, as they stood in the little screened porch of the Matson cottage. "Perhaps if we did——"

As she spoke she reached into the pocket of her sweater, took something from it, and was about to flash on her light and show it to her brother when he retorted impatiently:

"That's a lot of hot air, Merce, if you'll excuse my saying so!" and Mercedes dropped the object back into her pocket again, unseen by Ken.

CHAPTER IX

DOWN THE BAY

THE next day Ken elected to go fishing and he elected to go alone. "I want to be by myself awhile—and think," he said as he was making ready to go. A little hurt at his summary dismissal of her, Mercedes took a book shortly after breakfast and went out to sit on the dunes. The fog had drifted away during the night, with a change of wind, the weather was flawless, with brilliant sunlight, a crisp breeze, and a ruffled ocean of intense blue. It was hard to look on such a peaceful scene and contrast it with the turbulent doings of yesterday. She almost felt as if she must have dreamed it all in some disturbing nightmare. Only the fact that Ken had gone out quite early before breakfast, strayed over to Windy Hollow and returned, reporting, "Nothing further doing—so far!" served to link the peaceful present with last night's unrest.

Presently Sanford came by with an armful of driftwood and scrambled up to where she sat.

"How'd you like to go out on the Bay in the garvey with me this morning?" he asked. "Dad wants me to go down the back shore on an errand for him, and it might interest you to come along. You haven't seen the place from the Bay side yet."

"I'd love to come, of course. But, do tell me, *what* is a 'garvey'? I never heard tell of one before," answered Mercedes, jumping up and preparing to accompany him.

"Oh, it's just a local name for a certain kind of narrow, open boat around here. Some people use them for getting oysters, but mine I just bought and put a motor in to have a little fun with. Wait just a minute and I'll be out. Better take a sweater. You may feel cold with that west wind blowing over the Bay."

They walked over to the Bay through the lane that ran past Windy Hollow. Mercedes glanced half fearfully up at the cupola as they went by. All was apparently still quiet and deserted about the place.

"Sanford," began Mercedes. "I haven't asked

you anything about what happened last night —after we left, but, do you know—I felt awfully sorry for Bennie, somehow."

"He sure did get a calling down from Dad, and lost his next 'liberty' because he either couldn't or wouldn't explain why he was late getting back from patrol, and why he forgot to punch the time clocks so often, and why he didn't go to the dentist as he said he was going to yesterday. I felt kind of sorry for him myself, but I didn't hear much of what was going on, 'cause Dad sent me over home soon after he began. I guess he didn't think it fair to Bennie for me to be listening in on his 'bawling out'. I don't know yet what alibi Bennie had. Dad was too busy to talk about it this morning. He says he's going to give this Anne Shaw business another day or so and see what develops. He feels sure the old lady hasn't come to any harm—just vamoosed."

On the shore of the Bay, Sanford helped Mercedes into a little rowboat and sculled her out to where the garvey was moored. In five minutes they were chugging down the Bay toward a spot some three miles away, where Sanford said his father wanted him to leave a mes-

sage with the captain of the next station. It was a delightful new experience for Mercedes, cruising down along the wild, uninhabited shore of the Bay, and she forgot her perplexities for a while in the sheer enjoyment of her surroundings.

At a certain point in the journey Sanford headed the garvey toward shore, anchored her a number of feet away, and asked Mercedes if she preferred to remain in the boat or come ashore with him.

"This is the Halfway Tree," he explained. "There she is standing up on that dune over there. That's as far as our boys go on patrol. Do you want to walk across with me? Dad wanted me to do another errand for him there." Gladly assenting, Mercedes rowed with him to the shore and tramped through the beach grass and bay bushes, over hollows and hummocks, to the ocean side, where an old dead cedar tree on the dune marked the halfway line between the two Coast Guard stations. Standing beside it was a post on which was something that looked to Mercedes like the fire-alarm boxes in the city. She had noticed one like it at the foot

of the dunes near their own station. Sanford took out a key and unlocked it.

"Whatever is that?" she demanded, peering in curiously.

"That's the time clock the surfmen have to punch when they come out on patrol," explained Sanford. "You see, there has to be some way of checking up whether they've come all the way down here. Most of 'em would, of course, but there are sometimes fellers with no conscience that'd just as soon duck it as not. The Coast Guard puts a key in that outside keyhole, when he gets here, and it punches a dial face at the time he arrives. Once a week, Dad collects the dial faces from the different clocks and checks up on whether they were all punched as they should be. He usually does it Saturday night. This isn't regular, for it's only Wednesday. But he wanted to find out whether Bennie punched his time last night as he should have, so he gave me the key and asked me to look and see."

They both peered in at the dial face which was somewhat of a mystery to Mercedes. But Sanford immediately exclaimed:

"Cracky!—the young sinner! He punched it after all! I'd have been willing to bet he didn't.

Somehow I was just dead sure it was he that was prowling around the Shaw place last night, and I was certain of it when he came in late from patrol and seemed all out of breath and all in. Look—his time is punched all right—half-past ten. Now, how did he manage it?"

At that moment Mercedes seemed on the point of saying something, but appeared to change her mind, and only shook her head as Sanford locked up the time clock once more and they prepared to retrace their steps to the garvey. Suddenly Sanford looked up the beach and called out:

"Hi! There's Ken coming along down the line. Wonder if he struck any luck?"

Mercedes watched the figure of her brother slowly working down the shore, making a cast every so often and plainly without any satisfactory results. When he was near enough they hailed him and he waved to them and indicated that they were to wait till he came abreast of them.

"No luck at all!" he complained when he had reeled in his line and scrambled up the dune to where they stood. "Hooked one beauty of a weakfish about a mile up, but he slipped off just

as I was about to land him, and that's the only strike I've had. Tired, too. It's heavy walking through the sand this morning. What you two doing here?"

They explained their errand to him, and Sanford commented on Bennie Morris's obvious fulfillment of his duties, as indicated by the time clock. Kenneth scratched his head.

"Just the same, you can't convince me he wasn't mixed up somehow in that fracas last night," he also averred. "The whole day's work pointed him out as being caught pretty red-handed. Got to be something more than this to prove otherwise to *me!* Well, I guess, if you fellows have room for me, I'll go along with you. I'm sort of leg weary and fed up with the fishing this morning. Going on down to Tate's Beach Station, did you say, Skinny? I haven't seen the old place this year. Let's go!"

Chugging along down the coast to the next station in the garvey, Kenneth disclosed to them another piece of news that he had unearthed during his morning trip down the beach.

"I met up with old Yates just a short way down from our station," he said. "He was fishing, too. We got to talking about the queer do-

ings over at the Shaw place, and he said if I was interested in that mix-up it'd pay me to come up in the C. G. tower on watch at night. He says he's seen some pretty peculiar things—did last night. Here's something I can't understand. He says that about half-past nine or ten o'clock last night with the glasses he noticed from the tower, a boat coming up the Bay. The fog was thinner there, and he saw some kind of a boat, probably a motor boat with no light at her masthead, coming creeping up close to shore till she hit in the cove there, a little below the Shaw place. Then she appeared to anchor. He said he couldn't tell if anyone came ashore because the fog was too thick in closer to see that. But he says he saw a faint light twice in the Shaw cupola and thought it was some kind of an answering signal, perhaps. After a while the boat moved off again. He thought she came from the mainland, but he couldn't be sure. The fog shut down on her very soon, and he didn't see her again. But it looks mighty peculiar coming on top of all the other things that've happened."

"Of course, we know that the light in the cupola wasn't a signal," offered Mercedes. "Or,

at least, we suppose it wasn't. It was there to help whoever was trying to clean up those finger prints, don't you think so?"

"That's what we *think,* anyway," said Sanford, "but things are getting so mixed up now that I don't know what to think. Just as soon as you seem to get one thing straightened out, two or three more step in and ball it all up."

Kenneth rumpled his light hair in deep thought. "Well, it's certainly brought a new element into the thing, but it doesn't let Bennie out, as far as I can see. Only gets him in deeper. Looks as if he was in cahoots with someone, all right. I'm going to act on old Yates's hint, at any rate, and go on tower watch with whoever has it to-night."

They reached the little dock that extended out into the Bay just back of the Coast Guard Station at Tate's Beach and greeted old Billy Tate, the proprietor of the solitary fisherman's hotel at the place, who was tinkering with his motor boat. Fat and jolly as he usually was, old Billy was not, however, in a good humor that morning.

"What's wrong, Billy?" inquired Sanford. "Rheumatism got you this morning?"

Billy straightened up and mopped his perspiring brow with an enormous red bandanna.

"'Tain't rheumatiz, thank heaven!" he explained. "But I sure am peeved this morning. Come down here to take myself up to Orrstown in this boat and find it all out of gee, somehow. Somebody been usin' it last night or my name ain't William, for I looked her all over yesterday afternoon, gettin' her ready for the trip to-day, an' she was in apple-pie order. Now she's out o' gas an' all mussed up. Looks as if somebody was runnin' her last night that didn't know much how, or else they jest misused her deliberate."

"But, Billy," queried Sanford, walking out on the dock to inspect the motor boat, "if someone took your boat last night, you sure would've heard her, wouldn't you? She makes enough racket getting started to wake the dead."

"My hearin' ain't what it use to be," complained Billy. "One ear's gone plumb to the bad, an' when I get sleepin' on that good ear Gabriel's trump wouldn't get a rise out o' me! But I sure would like to know who had my boat last night —an' in all that fog, too!"

They were not able to enlighten him and

passed on up the little dock to the shore, leaving him grumbling over his hard luck. While Sanford went in to transact his business with old Captain Wareham, Mercedes and her brother rambled over to the dunes and sat looking out on the tossing ocean.

"Perhaps it hasn't struck you," said Kenneth at last, after several moments of deep thought and chewing of beach grass, "that, considering the weather, it's something more than a coincidence—Billy's boat being used last night, and what old Yates saw!"

CHAPTER X

ON PATROL

NUMBER FIVE SURFMAN, Bennie Morris, started out on the night of that same day on his ten-o'clock patrol down the beach. He inserted his key in the time clock on the post at the foot of the path leading over the dunes from the Station, hitched in his belt a little tighter, settled his cap more securely on his head against a strong south wind, squared his shoulders, and started in on the long, grilling trek through the heavy sand to the Halfway Tree. The tide was in and there was no firm sand as a foothold.

On and on he plowed, head bent to the wind, quite unsuspecting that two figures were following him a short way behind on the other side of the dunes.

"Do you think he can see us, Sanford?" whispered Mercy uneasily. "Suppose he takes it into his head to come up on the dunes or across here!"

"He isn't likely to, unless he's up to something he oughtn't to be, and then it doesn't matter if we do catch him. He'll deserve to be caught. His business is to walk down that beach, punch his clock, and get back again. He's not supposed to go off it unless he sees something that ought to be looked into, like Dane seeing that light in the shack the other night. They aren't even supposed to come up the beach back of the dunes in a heavy northeaster, though they'd be much more sheltered there. So don't worry."

"I wish Ken had come with us," went on Mercy as she plodded through the fine and shifting sand. "We may need him before we get back."

"It was better for him to go up in the tower with Dane, on watch, as he planned," commented Sanford. "He may see something we would miss, and it's important not to miss a single trick in this business from now on. If we divide up forces in this way, we'll get on a lot faster. You stay here a minute while I peek over the dunes and see what's happening to Bennie."

He left her and scrambled up cautiously to

peer over the top of a low dune. The night was moonless, for a crescent had set an hour or two before, back of the Bay, but the stars were very brilliant. One, indeed, low in the east, made an absolute path of pale reflected light on the ocean, almost like moonlight. Sanford came back in a moment to report Bennie progressing as per schedule, and they themselves resumed their plodding way.

On and on they plowed, saying little, for it took most of their breath to struggle along in the heavy sand, except in the occasional stretches where beach grass and other growths made the foothold easier. At intervals Sanford would scramble up to survey the landscape and report on Bennie. The latter, however, gave them no cause for concern, for he seemed bent, apparently, on his Coast Guard duties and nothing else. The Halfway Tree was reached, and Bennie punched his time clock, watched from afar by the two concealed in a clump of beach-plum bushes well back from the dune.

Mercedes muttered with almost a sigh of regret, "Well, I guess that's that! Nothing's going to happen to-night. He's simply going back,"

when Sanford grabbed her arm and pushed her down behind the bush again.

"Wait!" he whispered. "I'm not so sure he's going right back. He just looked at his watch and stared around him kind of uncertainly. He came down here at a pretty good clip—I know that, for he had us winded following him—and I think he's a bit ahead of time. Bet you anything he did that on purpose and that he's up to something!"

They watched while the young Coast Guardsman stood looking about him, apparently trying to make up his mind about his own actions. But at last he seemed to made his decision, and, instead of turning back on his course and retracing his steps to his station, he set off at right angles in a rather furtive manner.

"Just as I thought!" muttered Sanford. "He's aiming for that old Cushman shack again, where we were the other day. This path leads right to it. Come on! We've got to see what's up."

At a discreet distance they followed him, trying to be as silent as possible in brushing through the bushes which at that point grew very thickly about the path. They dared not switch on their pocket flashlights for fear of be-

ing seen, so had to stumble along as best they could in the darkness. Suddenly Mercedes stepped on a dead branch that lay directly in the path, and it broke with a loud snap under her weight. They both stopped in consternation.

"Holy cats!" whispered Sanford. "He certainly must have heard that! Here—*quick!* Slip behind these bushes and don't make a sound. He's coming back, I think."

They both scurried into some thick bushes and crouched down out of sight of the path. In a moment they heard the crunch of footsteps and could see Bennie come flying back, hurry past the spot where they were concealed, and stop uncertainly a little farther on.

"He's going to miss us," muttered Sanford. "He hasn't any flashlight or he could see our footprints behind his in the sand. That would be a dead give-away. Here he comes back."

Bennie had turned and was retracing his steps, uneasily peering about him as he came. For a breathless instant he paused directly opposite where the two were concealed, and peered about into the darkness. Then, to their unbounded relief, he wandered on, reassured by the complete silence and solitariness of his sur-

roundings. When he was once more well ahead of them, they scrambled out of their hiding place and picked up his trail, Mercedes vowing to herself that she would be more careful.

"It's the Cushman shack, all right!" muttered Sanford. "See, he's turning into it. I thought that was where he was aiming at."

"What shall we do now?" queried Mercedes.

"Follow him and stay outside, near enough to see what's going on, if possible," decided Sanford.

They watched Bennie push open the door of the shack and disappear inside, and crept along till they were almost directly opposite one of the little windows, where they remained, screened by the bushes that grew fairly close to it. They had almost expected to see the place lighted in some way after Bennie went in, but it continued to remain in darkness, and for what seemed an interminable period there was not a sound. Suddenly Mercedes clutched Sanford's arm and muttered, "Hush. I'm just certain I heard voices in there!"

They listened with tensely held breath. "You're right. There's talking going on there," agreed Sanford. "I wonder if we could crawl

a little nearer and get the words. Doesn't it beat all who he can be talking to?—unless he's gone batty and is talking to himself!" Carefully, and with the least rustling possible, they crept nearer to the little window. But even at a distance of fifteen to twenty feet, which was as near as they dared come, the voices were indistinct and they could catch only occasional phrases or isolated words. That the young fellow was really talking to someone else and not just soliloquizing out loud was obvious, for the answering voice was quite noticeably different from his own.

"Oh, I can't hear them plainly—I can't make anything out of what they say!" groaned Mercy. "Can you?"

"Only a very little. Hush—we may be missing something!" The murmured conversation went on. Suddenly it seemed as if one of the voices grew more excited. "No—no! I can't do it, I tell you." The voice was undoubtedly Bennie's. And there was an answer from the other —"Well, I'm afraid it has *got* to be done or the whole thing will be a failure"; and after a moment's silence, "and we've waited years for the opportunity."

Bennie's reply was inaudible except for the

final phrase, which both listeners distinguished —"and the Skipper'd never stand for it. I'm in bad enough now. . . ."

The murmured conversation went on, punctuated by pauses and never again audible to the listeners in the bushes till there was a final querulous burst from Bennie— "I gotta be going now—I'll be late again, and the Old Man'll light into me. I'll think it over. If she thinks I ought to . . ." And the remainder was lost in an inarticulate murmur. Two minutes later, quite unexpectedly, Bennie burst from the door of the shack and went hurrying along the path back toward the beach. So unexpected had been his exit that the two at the side of the house, out in quite plain view, where they had moved to hear better, had not the slightest chance to get to cover. Had Bennie glanced in that direction, he could not have failed to see them, in spite of the darkness, so near was he to their vicinity. But his hurry to get back to the shore and his apparent disturbance over the interview he had been through, had upset him so that he noticed nothing and was out of sight while they were still rooted to the spot with surprise.

"Shall we follow him?" breathed Mercy,

when she had recovered sufficiently for speech.

"Not on your life!" he whispered. "We're going to stay right here and see who comes out of that shack. And if somebody doesn't pretty quick, I'm going in there myself. This monkey business isn't going on any longer if I know it!"

Mercedes had never seen him so aroused. "But—but—mightn't it be dangerous?" she faltered. "You don't know who may be in there. It may be some desperate character. Maybe they're bootleggers, or something like that, and Bennie has got mixed up with them somehow. No doubt they're armed, and you haven't a thing about you to defend yourself with. I think you're crazy, Sanford!"

And at her appeal Sanford himself hesitated. He realized that he had someone besides himself to think of. He must not subject Mercedes to any form of danger, even if something else in the quest eluded him.

"Guess you're right!" he apologized sheepishly. "I ought to have remembered that. But I'm sure it's not bootleggers. Doesn't look like that sort of thing at all. We'll just get back in the bushes a bit and watch that place. If anyone

slips out of it we'll sure see them and could follow them up and see what happens."

With a thrill of deep excitement Mercedes consented, realizing that here were genuine adventure and suspense, and that she, Mercedes Haynes, who had never had an adventure in her life till the present, was in the thick of it.

Crouching down in the bushes they waited, growing cold as the night grew chillier and later. The shack remained in darkness and silence, nor was there a vestige of life about it, from the moment that Bennie had left it. At last Mercedes began to shiver. Sanford noticed it and remarked.

"You're chilly, and it's getting awfully late. From the way things look, I should say that whoever is in there must have gone to sleep. Tell you what I'll do. You stay here and I'll just crawl over there and look in the window and see if I can find out what's going on."

He left their hiding place and crawled out cautiously toward the shack. Mercedes watched him go, saw him approach the window and cautiously peer in for a long interval intently. Then she saw him walk around to the door, carefully push it open, and walk in. For the next

Mercedes saw Sanford approach the window and cautiously peer in.

three moments she held her breath almost literally, for a light appeared, shining through the window, and someone was plainly walking about inside. Two minutes later the light was extinguished and Sanford came hurrying out to her, consternation and astonishment in every intonation of his voice.

"Can you beat it?" he almost shouted. *"The place is absolutely empty—not a soul in there!"*

CHAPTER XI

A NEW FACTOR IN THE PROBLEM

THEY both rushed back into the shack, and Sanford turned his flashlight about the tiny interior. It was all too plainly empty of other human occupation.

"Now, how in time could anyone——" began Sanford impatiently, then interrupted himself and ran to the window opposite the one near which they had been stationed. Then he burst out of the little hut again and hurried round to view it from outside. In a moment he was back.

"Just as I thought—I might have suspected it! Whoever was in here must have got out that window and off that way. There are footprints all around it, and they just disappear into the bushes."

"Perhaps they're Bennie's," suggested Mercy.

"Nothing like them," Sanford averred. "Bennie's foot is short and slender. These look as if they'd been made with big, clumping boots. And, besides that, Bennie went in and out of

the door. We saw him. These footsteps never came near the door, apparently. There's not one like them around it. No, *sir!* They're someone else's, all right. And I guess it's up to us to find out who they belong to."

"Sanford, could they be Anne Shaw's?" demanded Mercedes. "If they're not, do you realize that there's a third person in this tangle now?"

"You said it! That struck me as soon as I heard that voice in there awhile ago. That was never Anne Shaw's. She had a sort of thin, high voice. That one was deep and like a man's. You'd know the difference at once if you'd ever heard her speak."

"And think of what we heard that voice say," went on Mercy. "I only caught one remark—something about 'it's got to be done,' and 'waiting years for the opportunity.' What's 'got to be done,' do you suppose, and what can it have to do with Anne Shaw—and Bennie?"

"Now you're asking conundrums! But I'm sure there's something deeper here than any one of us suspect," was Sanford's reply. "I think we'd better be getting back now. It's awfully late."

They glanced once more curiously about the rough little shack. There was nothing new or different about it from the time they had seen it before. Some fresh sand appeared to be tracked in, especially around the window, but that was all. Everything else was undisturbed. Closing the door behind them, they started back on the long tramp toward the Coast Guard Station, this time proceeding along at the edge of the waves. As the tide had begun to fall, there was a comparatively firm support for their feet, and the distance seemed much shorter than on the way down. As the wind was quite strong and both were tired and bewildered by the new elements in the case, there was little conversation on the return trip.

But once in the house they encountered Kenneth, who had been waiting for them, in considerable excitement, after his tower watch, Without giving them a moment in which to describe their own adventures, he began:

"Well, I see you got back all right. Bennie got back too, and just about on time, so I figure nothing special happened in your direction. But, say, you ought to have been with me, and you'd have seen something interesting. Come over

and sit by the fire—it's kind of chilly to-night, so I threw on a little wood—and I'll tell you all about it."

They saw that it was useless to try to explain anything about their own adventures till Ken had gotten his off his chest, so to speak, so they came over and settled down before the open fire, which seemed very welcome after their chilly vigil "on patrol." But privately, Mercedes decided that it would be Kenneth who had the biggest surprise when all was said and done.

"Well," began her brother, "I went up there at ten with Dane, and we had a pretty slow time for a while. Nothing happened, and Dane's not a very talkative person, and had to tend to his duties, besides. There's nothing to sit on up there, and you either have to keep walking around, or stand staring out or sit down on the floor, so it was rather slow. I was keeping a keen watch over toward the Shaw place, but I was beginning to get desperately sleepy when Dane came over to me and said I'd better take a look through the glasses at something coming up the Bay.

"It proved to be a motor boat, chugging along as close to the shore as it could get and without

a light. It ran in behind a point of the shore that juts out not far below here, and we lost sight of it. But the faint 'put-putting' stopped, so we figured that the boat must have anchored there, or turned off the motor, anyway. I was for rushing over there to see what it was, but Dane said I'd better wait and see if anything else happened—and where—before I started to investigate.

"So I settled down again, and we kept a sharp lookout all about the region, but never a thing did we see till, a long while afterward, Dane touched my arm and said, 'Look there!' and pointed over to the Shaw place. There was a light in the cupola again, sure enough. But it was different from the way we'd seen it before —just looked, somehow, as if it were coming through chinks instead of shining through the window panes as it usually had. I couldn't understand it—and said so. But Dane explained it by suggesting that someone had closed the shutters to those windows before lighting the light. He said Anne Shaw used to keep them closed sometimes when it was very windy. He'd seen her closing them himself, occasionally.

"Well, you'd just better believe I lost no

time after that, but hiked it over as quick as I could to Shaw's. I stopped to see if Captain Matson was free to go with me, but Mrs. Matson said he'd gone to bed with a bad earache, so I concluded not to bother him. All the rest of the C. G.'s were asleep. So I beat it off by myself, with my pocket torch and a good, thick stick that I was going to use as a club if necessary.

"I kept out of sight as much as possible, getting there, and sneaked in the back way, as I figured that whoever was there might be watching the front entrance. No one was in the kitchen or thereabouts, though it looked as if someone might have been very recently. There was a glass half full of water standing on the table, and there was some water spilled around the pump by the sink, showing that someone had gotten a drink there. That was all that was new.

"But I didn't linger long in the kitchen when I knew that whoever I was after was up in the cupola, so up I went, by those back stairs, and along the hall that runs toward the front, as I had to reach the only pair of stairs that went to the third story. Unfortunately, just about

in the middle of that hall, a loose board in the flooring made a fearful racket just as I stepped on it—one of those noises that echo through an empty house at night like the dickens. I was mad enough to hit the roof, but I stood perfectly still for a couple of minutes, hoping the noise had escaped notice. But it hadn't. In a minute I heard footsteps hurrying down those front stairs, and before I could reach them myself someone went flying down ahead of me and out the front door. I just had time to turn my flash on the figure as it vanished out of the door in the hall below. And all I could see was *someone wrapped from head to foot in a gray shawl!"*

He stopped there impressively, and his two listeners could only gasp with astonishment at his tale. They had thought their own remarkable enough, but here was something that quite equalled if not surpassed it.

"Then—it must have been Anne Shaw herself!" exclaimed Mercedes.

"There's just this about it," her brother explained. "That figure, whoever it was, was a pretty rapid mover. All I can say is, if Anne Shaw, who must be between seventy-five and eighty, can move as fast as that person did, she's

a pretty lively stepper for her age." But Sanford was thinking along another tack.

"Well, anyway, did you let it get away?" he demanded impatiently. "You followed it, didn't you?"

"You just bet I did! I rushed down those steps and out that door like a young tornado. But even in that short time, whoever it was had given me the slip. There wasn't a sign of them along the path to the Bay, or in the other direction, either. The only other bet was the woods right across the little path from the gate. I dived in there, past the pump of drinking water, and then there were several branches, any one of which might have been taken.

"Right then and there, I knew it would be wasting time to try to follow up *all* those paths, so I decided to take the one that led most directly over to the Bay. For I figured that the mysterious visitor had come in that motor boat Dane saw and it was probably getting back to it as rapidly as possible. So I got down to the shore of the Bay in the shortest time I could make and wandered up and down for a long distance in either direction, but never a sign of a motor boat did I see—nor of any other per-

son, either. It was certainly peculiar. I could have bet that they'd make a break for the boat first thing and I could catch them that way. They couldn't possibly have got to it and away before I got there. That would have been a sheer miracle.

"Well, after I'd wasted about half an hour there, I was mad clear through and decided to go back to the house and see if I could find any traces of the visitor up in the cupola. So back I traveled. Got to the house without meeting anyone and walked all around it, just for curiosity, before I went in. And right there I found out how I'd been jolly well fooled at the very getaway. Around at the side, the slats or grille work that rail in that space under the veranda have broken down or rotted away, if you remember, leaving quite a space where anyone could crawl under the veranda and prowl about under a good portion of the house. The cellar evidently only goes part way under the house. And all around under there by the opening were footprints, freshly made, showing plainly enough what must have happened. That bird had just sneaked around there before I reached the door and got out of the house and

hid under the veranda. I had made a bee line for the gate when I appeared, so it was as easy for them as rolling off a log. They just stayed put till I was out of sight and then calmly took themselves off in any direction they chose.

"I went back into the house by the front entrance and straight upstairs to the cupola for I figured that I might be able to see from there if anyone were still prowling around, as well as discover what they had been up to in the tower. I found the blinds had been closed in, just as Dane had said—and on the floor there lay—you'd never guess what!—a *chisel!* There was no sign that it had been used in any way, so I just picked it up and put it in my pocket. Here it is."

He took it out of his pocket and laid it in his sister's lap, an ordinary carpenter's chisel with a plain wooden handle. There were no identifying marks about it.

"What do you suppose they were going to do with it?" queried Mercy.

"I've no idea. They may have been just carrying it around and it fell there when they were startled. Or they may really have been going to use it in some way. Can't tell, but it looks

rather suspicious. Anyhow, I was going to tell you, that I hadn't been up there more than two minutes when I heard the 'put-put' of a starting motor boat. And when I looked out and down the Bay with my night glasses, there was one without a light, sneaking away from shore down near where I'd been only a little while before. So that bird had beaten me, after all. Probably just waited around till he saw me safely on the way back and then hopped in. Pretty clever, I call it!"

Kenneth sat back and surveyed his audience to see what effect his recital had had on them. They were certainly impressed, and said so unequivocally, but they were also anxious to tell their own tale.

"Well, you surely had an exciting evening," began Mercy, "but we had our adventures too. Wait till you hear——"

"Just wait a minute," interrupted Ken. "I hadn't quite finished. I kept the strangest till the last. Look at this!"

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a scrap of paper and laid it in Mercy's hands.

CHAPTER XII

A SCRAP OF PAPER

THEY both crowded behind Mercy to look over her shoulder as she took up the odd-looking scrap of paper that Kenneth had laid in her lap. It was soiled and crumpled and appeared to be a page torn from some pocket notebook of the fine cross-bar variety. In the middle of it were some rather shaky lines that looked remarkably like a plan of a floor or room, made with ink, with hand-printed lettering around the edges. The lines formed a square, with sections let in on four sides, that might have marked windows or doors, and some sort of aperture indicated near the middle. On one side, near one of the marks that possibly indicated a window was a faint cross and the printed letters reading *"Possibly here."* There was nothing else about it to give a clue to its use or meaning.

"What is it?" queried Mercy. "It's evidently the plan or map of something. Have you figured out what it means, Ken?"

"You just bet I have," he replied enthusiastically. "As you say, it doesn't take much thought to see it's meant for a plan or map. Anybody could see that. And when you consider where I found it, it doesn't take much more thought to figure that it was meant for a map of that little cupola room. The cupola's square and so's the room—and so's this plan. These little openings on the four sides must be the windows, and this affair coming up the middle is undoubtedly the ladder stairway from below. The question now is, what's the meaning of that cross marked *'Possibly here'?* Just consider that, in connection with the chisel I found, and you have a very clear idea of what somebody was doing in that cupola—hunting for something they thought was concealed there. No doubt the chisel was to come in handy in prying up boards and so on. Get me?"

Sanford had said not a word all this while, but had been staring at the paper in deep thought. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Guess you better hear now what happened

to us, Ken, and then we'll put our wits together and dope out some plan of action."

"My hat! I didn't know you two had *had* any adventures to-night. Thought it had all been plain sailing, since Bennie got back on time. Fire away!"

They gave him a detailed account of their own adventurous evening, and then all three sat silent for a number of minutes, thinking it over.

"It's perfectly plain to me," began Kenneth, at last, "that there's some well-planned scheme afoot here to get hold of something that's hidden somewhere in that house. That remark you overheard by that strange voice—'We've been waiting for this opportunity for years'—makes it practically certain. And Bennie is in on the plot somehow. Where old Mrs. Shaw comes in on it, I don't know. In all likelihood it's something she has that's wanted. Her disappearance makes me think she's either been done away with or kidnapped. Probably the latter, to get her out of the way while they're doing the hunting. What doesn't somehow fit in is Bennie's remark that you overheard—'If she thinks

I ought to.' If the 'she' refers to Anne Shaw, that knocks that theory cold."

"But there's evidently a third party too—the one we heard talking in the hut to-night with Bennie. It's a man—you could tell by the voice. Gee! this is beginning to look thicker than I ever thought possible." It was Sanford who was speaking, and he held out the scrap of paper toward them now. "Look at this thing carefully. D'you see anything about it that looks familiar?"

The other two examined it intently. "I don't see anything special about it," began Mercy, "except what we've already seen. It's very dirty and crumpled and——"

"Hold on!" cried Kenneth excitedly. "I see what you mean. It has some fingerprints around the edge! Yes—and one seems to be a thumb mark and has a spot in it just like that one on the stairs. By golly! this is interesting."

He pointed it out to them all. There was no mistaking it, the same tiny cross like a healed wound, evidently the mark of some scar.

"Maybe I won't invent some excuse to look at Bennie's left thumb to-morrow morning!" exulted Sanford. "He's the one that's in deepest,

and it'll be easy to prove *this* much, anyway!"

"But Bennie wasn't the one who was in here to-night," Mercy reminded him. For a moment he looked blank.

"True enough!" he acknowledged finally. "But it won't hurt to see if he has a thumb mark, anyway, and I know just how I'm going to go about it. And now it strikes me that it's time Dad took this matter in hand and had the house watched. Such goings on as this may lead to a robbery or fire or a murder—or goodness knows what!"

"I think the same thing," agreed Kenneth. "But it's good and late, and the Captain went to bed with a bad earache. It would be a shame to wake him now, for I don't believe anything more's going to happen to-night. The show's over for this time. Let's all go to bed and talk it over with him in the morning."

They all agreed with him and retired to their separate rooms. But Kenneth first retrieved the scrap of paper, folded it carefully, placed it in his wallet, and in his room laid the wallet aside on the bureau. Once, during the process of undressing, he opened the wallet, took out the paper, and studied it intently by the light of the

kerosene lamp. After that he replaced it, turned out the light, and was soon in bed, the whole day forgotten in dreamless slumber.

He awoke once toward morning with the uneasy consciousness that all was not quite normal and as it should be in the room. Flashing his light about, he could discover nothing amiss, however, except that the screen to one of his windows near the bureau had evidently been blown in during the night and lay half across a chair that stood by the window. He got up and replaced the screen and returned to bed annoyed to have had his slumbers interrupted by the performance.

The next morning he and Mercedes breakfasted alone. Sanford had driven his mother up to town early to do some marketing, and the Captain was over at the Station. Mrs. Matson had left their breakfast warming on the stove, so they had only to help themselves.

"Kenneth," began his sister, between two mouthfuls of cereal, "do let me see that scrap of paper again, will you? Somehow, I didn't get a clear idea of it last night."

Kenneth was deeply absorbed in his eggs and bacon, but he obligingly went to his room

to get his wallet, which was still on his bureau. Bringing it back, he opened it at the table and reached into the compartment where he had placed the paper the night before. Then he began to search frantically through all its compartments. Then he turned the entire contents out on the table and sorted it over in vain. There was no such paper as he sought among its contents. He turned on his sister in sudden anger.

"Look here, Merce, if you're playing a trick on me, cut it out right now, please! This is a bit too serious for nonsense of that kind. Hand the paper over. I don't feel humorous this morning." Mercedes stared at him in astonishment so genuine that he could not doubt it.

"You must be crazy, Ken!" she exclaimed indignantly. "I never took the paper. You've had it in your room all night and I haven't been near it."

"Forgive me, Merce!" he apologized sheepishly. "I thought for a moment that you might have slipped in while I was sleeping and taken it to look at, and that you just wanted to give me a start by asking for it and watching me hunt. Maybe Sanford needed it this morning to show

the Captain and got it without waking me. That must certainly be it, for it isn't there now, and there's no other way that it could have got away from me. We'll get it when Skinny comes back."

They finished breakfast, and Kenneth went over to the Station to interview the Captain, while Mercedes took a book and went out to sit on the dunes and read. After a long interval, Kenneth joined her, a worried look in his blue eyes.

"Queer thing!" he began, flinging himself down beside her. "I had a long talk with the Captain and told him all the doings of last night. But Skinny never even saw his father this morning, much less showed him that paper. Of course, it's possible that he took it anyway, for some other reason, but it strikes me as queer and very unlike him to come to my room and take it from my wallet without waking me or leaving any word or anything. He doesn't do things that way, as a rule. But, of course, the circumstances are unusual. There's nothing to do, I suppose, but to wait till he gets back. The Captain is going to take steps to have the house under pretty constant watch, so nothing ought

to get by us after this. That's about as far as we've got, up to date."

They waited for Sanford's return in considerable impatience and at last saw him coming along the path over the dunes. When he had joined them, Kenneth put the question as diplomatically as he could, for he did not want to offend the boy by intimating that there was any reason why he should not have come and got the paper if he wanted it.

"I say, Skinny, you didn't happen to see that bit of paper since last night, did you?"

Sanford looked blank. "What bit of paper?—Oh, you mean the thing you found in the cupola? Sure I haven't. I went out with Mother before you were up. I haven't seen it since last night. Why, what's happened?"

Kenneth told him, and his astonishment was too genuine to doubt. "You say the screen was out of one of your windows early this morning and that you examined the paper last night, standing by the bureau. Did you have the shade lowered while you did it?"

"I really don't remember," said Kenneth, "but I rather think not. Why?"

"Because anyone prowling around outside

could have seen you plainly, and after you were asleep it was a cinch to push in the screen, get your wallet from the bureau, and take out that paper—if he happened to want it. And I'm willing to bet anything that's how it disappeared."

"And it was one of the most valuable clues we had!" cried Kenneth disgustedly. "Well, it only goes to show that this is a pretty bad piece of business and that we must be rather closely watched ourselves. I don't like it. It's a whole lot more serious than it looked at first, when it comes to having your bedroom entered and things stolen out of your wallet."

"Well, there's this about it," Sanford reminded him. "The scrap of paper didn't belong to us in the first place. It was someone else's lost property, and I suppose they thought they had a perfect right to get it back. They probably discovered they'd lost it after they got away, sneaked back, and watched around to see what you were up to. If you stood near your window with the light going and the shade up and examined the thing and then left it right there on the bureau within reach, you can scarcely blame them for getting it back, can you? I don't think they even had to get into the room to do it. They

could take out the screen (it's only one of those collapsible ones) and reach in to the bureau without any trouble. It was *too* easy!"

"Yes," agreed Kenneth, "I suppose that's the way it happened. Goodness knows, I made it easy enough for him—whoever he was!" The three contemplated the problem in gloomy silence for a while. It was Sanford who finally broke it.

"Well, there's no use worrying over it, I figure. Here's some mail for you, Miss Mercedes. And, oh, by the way—I was almost forgetting it—what do you think of this thing that came to me in the mail this morning?" And he put a sheet of paper with a single typewritten sentence in the middle of it into Ken's hand.

CHAPTER XIII

WARNING!

KENNETH read it aloud—the single typewritten sentence— *"'Mrs. Anne Shaw will not require you to do anything more about the house or barn till her return.'"* And the three exclaimed almost simultaneously, "Now, what do you suppose *that* means?"

"It means that I'm politely fired from a job I only offered to do out of kindness anyhow!" exclaimed Sanford. "I don't believe Anne Shaw ever saw the thing."

"It means that Anne Shaw must be coming back, anyway," ventured Mercy. "It says 'until her return,' doesn't it?"

"It means that you're *de trop,* as the French say—not wanted around," exploded Ken, "and to my mind it looks like a pretty sinister piece of work. Of course the old lady neither wrote it nor knew about it. It's a veiled threat, and you're warned—we *all* are, for that matter—

to keep our hands off. It's the first thing that has made me feel that perhaps something—the worst, maybe—*has* happened to the poor old lady. That 'until her return' looks too fishy. I don't believe she'll ever return. Where was that thing mailed from? Maybe we can trace it that way."

They looked at the postmark. "Toms River!" exclaimed Ken in disappointment. "Now if it had been Orrstown or one of the other small places farther down, we might be able to trace it. But in a larger town like Toms River, with so many coming and going, it would be impossible. Miss Agnes, at Orrstown post office, would have spotted any stranger around who came in and dropped a letter to you, Skinny, in a minute. Anyhow, keep the thing, and we may be able to make something out of it yet. Show it to the Captain, first thing. He ought to know about this. He said he was going to keep the house well watched, anyway. He'll need to do more than that, I'm afraid, before we see the end of this!"

Sanford then announced that he was going to take the garvey and go down the Bay to Tate's Beach to see if old Billy Tate had had his motor

boat tampered with again last night, and asked the other two if they cared to go with him. Kenneth agreed at once, but Mercy announced that she hadn't slept well the night before and was feeling rather tired and would just sit on the beach with a book while they were away. Her decision rather surprised them both, as she was usually so keen to miss nothing in the little drama in which they seemed to be involved, and Kenneth even undertook to make her change her mind.

"Oh, come along with us, Merce! You can rest all you want in the boat, once you get over to the Bay. We'll make you comfortable in the stern seat. What do you want to hang around here for, anyway?" But Mercy had made her decision and she was going to stick by it.

"No, I am really quite tired and sleepy, and I dread that plowing over to the Bay through the deep sand. I certainly need a couple of quiet hours. And I can keep an eye out for anything that looks queer around here too, while you're gone."

They finally conceded that perhaps it was a good thing for her to stay around the vicinity and watch for anything that looked out of the

way while they were off on their quest. So they departed over the dunes toward the Bay, leaving Mercedes alone on the dune top with her book.

For a considerable time she sat there, her book open in her lap but not reading a word. There was an idea simmering in her mind, and she wanted to think it out in perfect quietness, without being constantly interrupted by the conversation of the boys or the distracting happenings that were always diverting her thoughts.

For a time she half dozed, watching the scores of bold little teeter snipe that came in groups along the edge of the surf, seeking bravely and persistently for sand fleas in the wake of every inrolling breaker. She had heard that they came all the way up from the Argentine and would be migrating back there before the summer was over, and it made her actually weary to think of the long journey that was theirs.

Suddenly she was startled by an outrageous "Bang!" and looking back toward the Station observed that the Captain was having a breeches-buoy drill, and the explosion was the brass mortar used to fire the first line over the mast and platform near which a surfman always

stood to receive and drag it in. She could see the whole performance from where she sat, and, turning slightly, she set herself to watch the drill, which she had seen only once before. She noticed that Bennie Morris was the surfman on the platform, and that the Captain was being rather sharp with him for taking so long to reel in the line. When Bennie had hauled in the buoy itself, and scrambled into it, he was drawn rapidly to where the line was fastened. Owing, however, to some inadvertent movement or clumsiness on his part, he fell out of it before it was two thirds of the way across the space and was properly "bawled out" by the Captain for spoiling the drill. Mercedes could not help but be sorry for him. He seemed to be so continually in hot water.

Later, when the drill was all over and the paraphernalia all put away, she noticed that Bennie did not go back into the Station with the other men but stayed around outside, fussing at various odds and ends of tasks. And a little later he strolled over toward where she sat, pulling off his cap with a shy "Good-morning!" apparently bound up the beach toward town. The opportunity was one she had been

wishing for, and she determined not to let it pass.

"Good-morning!" she replied. "Do you happen to be in a hurry just now?"

"Why—why, no," he stammered, plainly rather surprised. "Did you—did you want anything?"

"I'd like awfully to ask a few questions about that breeches-buoy drill, if you've time to explain it to me a little. I've only seen it once before, and the Captain didn't have time then to tell me much about it, and I didn't like to bother him to explain what I didn't understand. How do the people on a real wreck manage to get hold of the line after it's shot out to them? And suppose they haven't any mast left on the ship to fasten it to—what then?"

Bennie sat down beside her and began to explain the proceedings with the breeches buoy so carefully and intelligently that she was not only astonished but delighted with his quiet, gentlemanly manner and his quick and logical mind. She had not, somehow, expected it in him. She had only seen him under such (for him) unfortunate and confusing circumstances that she had come to feel that he must be a rather

poor-spirited person whose lot was somewhat pitiful. Here was something entirely different. She began to wonder if she could get him to talk about himself and determined to try.

"Do you enjoy being in the Coast Guard Service?" she asked when he had finished his description. "Is it what you most like to do?"

He gave her a startled glance before answering. "Why—why, no. I *had* to come into it for a while. That is," he corrected himself hastily, "I came into it because I—I wanted to earn some money. I want to go to college. I—I'm keen to be a marine architect. It was a—was a rather good way to earn some money." He was staring out to sea while he made this lame explanation, and Mercedes could not see his eyes, but a telltale red flush had mounted into his face. Mercy swiftly made up her mind that while he was telling *some* of the truth, he undoubtedly was not disclosing it all.

"But, if I'm not too inquisitive, do you mind explaining why you chose the C. G. service?" she queried. "With your mind, you could probably find much better-paying work in the city and get to college so much sooner. Do you love the sea so much?"

He plainly found the question very difficult to answer. For a while he sat sifting the sand through his fingers, and she thought he was not going to answer at all. Finally he turned to her with a sort of impetuous confidence. "I'll tell you. I've *got* to keep at this job. There are reasons—I can't explain them—why I can't do anything else—at least for a while. I *hate* it, really! My thoughts are all on other things."

When he had made this confession, he suddenly drew into himself again, as if he had said far too much and regretted it. He also seemed about to get to his feet and walk off, but Mercy stopped him.

"Don't go just yet. What you say interests me so much. Isn't there some way that you can get out of this soon, then? I'd like to see you get into something you'd like and get where you want to. Perhaps Ken could help you."

Again he gave her an astonished look. "Why should *you* care?" he muttered. "You don't even know me. Nobody else cares that does. All they do is try to pick on me." He did not finish, but stared out to sea with renewed intensity and the conviction that again he had said too much. Mercedes took a sudden resolution. There was

something pitiful about this boy that made her want to help him out of his difficulties, if possible. Yet she did not want to seem officious or interfering. One thing, however, she determined to risk.

"Bennie," she began hesitatingly, "I'd like very much to ask you something, and I'd like you to believe that I'm not doing it to get you into trouble but really to help you, if possible. I don't believe you're doing anything wrong, but, could you tell me, what have you to do with this affair of Anne Shaw?"

At the mention of that name Bennie colored a deep scarlet. "What makes you think I'm mixed up in it?" he temporized.

"Oh, Bennie," she exclaimed impatiently, "what's the use of going into that? Everybody suspects you. So many things have happened that point to your being involved in it. Do believe me. I'm not asking this to get you to say anything that would hurt you afterward."

But Bennie was not yet ready to commit himself. "Would you—mind telling me what you mean—just what you know about it all?" he asked uneasily.

"Is that quite fair?" asked Mercedes in re-

turn. "You want me to tell you what I know, but you are not telling me anything, and I asked you first."

"Oh, if you only knew! If you could understand how I'm bound—what it all means!" he suddenly and quite unexpectedly burst out.

The boy's mental suffering was so evidently genuine that Mercedes was touched anew and determined to keep him in suspense no longer. "I have the best kind of reason for asking, Bennie," she began. "Since we met you at the little hut, the afternoon of the heavy fog, we all suspected that you were mixed in this queer thing in many ways, and the boys are both dreadfully set against you because they think there's something awfully wrong and 'shady' that you're in the middle of. But, somehow, I couldn't make myself believe that what you have to do with it is wrong—or if it is, you're being forced into it in some way. I can't help but trust you, you see."

Bennie stared at her a moment, a combination of both astonishment and gratitude written large in his face. Then he put his head in his hands and sat so for several silent moments, thinking it over. "I wish I could!—I wish I *could!*"

she heard him mutter once. But finally he shook his head and half rose to go.

"You're awfully kind—awfully good to me!" he stammered. "I—oh, you don't *know* how I want to tell you—but I can't!" He had half risen to leave her when Mercy stopped him by putting her hand on his arm.

"Wait!" she commanded. "I can't ask you any more to tell me, if you feel you must not, but perhaps you will know who this belongs to."

She reached into her sweater pocket, took something from it, and held it out to him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE THUMB OF BENNIE MORRIS

BENNIE took what she handed him and stared at it with startled eyes.

"Where—where did you get this?" he demanded at length.

"I picked it up, two nights ago, on the veranda of Windy Hollow—the Shaw place. The boys didn't see it. They don't know about it either. Does it belong to you, Bennie?"

"No—no, it doesn't!" he exclaimed violently. "I never owned—anything like it."

"But, Bennie," she argued, "are you certain? See— it is a silver cuff link shaped like an anchor and has the initials B. M. very plainly on the cross piece. There isn't anyone else around here that has these initials. I've thought over the names of every one."

"I tell you it isn't mine!" denied Bennie once more. "See—here are my cuff links. They're the only pair I own." He reached out his arm,

and in the sleeve of his dark blue flannel shirt she saw a pair of ordinary little mother-of-pearl links such as many wear. Half convinced, half doubting, Mercedes conceded:

"Well, Bennie, if you say so I must believe you, for I *do* believe in you, you know. And anyway, the night I found it, you had been on patrol down the beach. But *someone* was in that house and doing some pretty strange things, for we were there too and almost caught whoever it was. And on the veranda, afterward, I picked up this. The boys didn't see it, and I haven't told them of it yet. Naturally, I couldn't help thinking it belonged to you, when you came in later so flustered and out of breath—and then—the initials."

For a moment Bennie seemed to hesitate. He stood twirling his cap about and gazing out to sea, as if weighing the pros and cons carefully before committing himself. And Mercedes thought to help him along by one more encouragement.

"You can absolutely depend on me, Bennie, if you care to tell me about this, that I shall not use it to get you into trouble or tell it to any-

one else if you don't wish me to. It will be absolutely safe with me."

But some obscure influence was evidently pulling him in another direction. He turned to her at last and said in a tone of utter desperation:

"I can't do it, Miss Mercy. I want to—you don't know how much—but I can't. There's too much against me. I only—I only ask you to trust me—that I'm trying not to do anything wrong. And I thank you so much for—for your interest."

He stooped to return to her the little cuff link which he was still holding between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. And as she took it her eye was held fascinated for a moment by the thumb of that hand. She had opened her lips to speak, but suddenly closed them again and took the trinket back in silence.

"Good-bye," muttered Bennie. "I must be going up to town on an errand. Is there anything I can do for you there?"

"Nothing, thank you," she replied, and added, "but remember that I trust you, Bennie, in spite of all appearances."

"Thank you!" he murmured huskily, and

strode away, leaving a sorely puzzled and bitterly disappointed girl behind.

For a long time after he had gone Mercedes continued to sit where she was, thinking, thinking over the strange situation in which she had suddenly been plunged. The boys returned from the expedition on the Bay and found her there. They accused her of having been asleep, and in their enthusiasm to tell her about their own adventures, they did not even think to ask if *she* had had any, nor did she choose to enlighten them.

"We're hot on the trail of something new, Merce!" cried Ken, throwing himself down beside her and selecting a blade of grass to chew. "You ought to have been with us this morning. We had a long talk with Billy Tate. Show Merce what he gave us, Skinny."

Sanford reached in his pocket and brought out a small bit of some gray woolly material about two inches in diameter, very much torn and frayed about the edges.

"The gray shawl!" cried Mercy, as soon as her eyes fell on it.

"Exactly," agreed Kenneth. "At least, that's what we both think. It's the identical material.

Billy says his boat was used again last night, and this morning he found it all gummed up as usual and this bit of material caught on a splintered piece of board in one of the thwarts. He's going to take the batteries out of the boat at night, after this, and stop that nonsense about its being used. But he says he can't imagine who'd take it, for there isn't a living soul besides himself in that region except the Coast Guards, and they'd never think of doing such a thing without asking his permission first. But that isn't all we discovered. What do you think of this? Billy Tate declares he saw Bennie Morris prowling around the beach and Bay shore well down below the Tate's Beach Station day before yesterday. Said he acted awfully strange too. Billy saw him some distance off and hailed him, because he wanted to send a message up to Captain Matson. But the minute Bennie saw him he ducked and got to cover somewhere back of the bushes and never came out again, though Billy waited around and poked through the place where he'd disappeared for an hour or two afterward."

Mercedes started to say something, but her brother interrupted: "Wait a minnte—there's

something funnier than that! Skinny says that that morning Bennie was on duty around the Station from ten to twelve—he knows he was, for a positive fact—so he couldn't possibly have been down as far as that at the same time. Some mix-up—what?"

"Maybe Billy was mistaken in the time," suggested Mercy. "It might have been another morning."

"No, it was the morning of the day of the big fog. He knows it positively because he had been planning to run up to Orrstown in his boat that afternoon and wanted Bennie to leave word with Captain Matson that he'd be in to have a talk with him that evening on the way back. But the fog came up in the afternoon and he decided not to go till another time. There's no mistake about it. Now, the question is, how did Bennie get down there—if he *was* there—and back again?"

"But you know he couldn't have been there," Mercy reminded him, "because that was the day he had the toothache and asked Mr. Yates if he could go up to Orrstown in the afternoon to the dentist. And then we met him later down at that shack."

The argument was unanswerable. Kenneth scratched his head and appealed to Sanford for a solution. But Sanford had spent the morning in question in the Shaw house with Mercy, and knew no more of Bennie's whereabouts than did Kenneth himself. While they were marvelling over and discussing the sheer impossibilities of the situation, Sanford reminded them:

"I guess it must be dinner time. There's Mother waving from the door to us over here. We'd better go in."

That same afternoon after dinner, Kenneth announced, "I came down here to fish, and I seem to be spending most of my time playing detective. But this afternoon I *am* going to fish—and nothing can stop me. Give me time to think, too, and this thing sure does need some thinking out. Want to come along, Merce?"

"No, I don't believe I care to to-day," she decided, much to his surprise. "It has turned rather cold and windy, and I'm going to stay around here and read. I haven't read a word, scarcely, since I've been here. Why don't you take Sanford?"

"Oh, Skinny's got a job tinkering with their car. It's sort of acting up, he says, and it'll take

him the best part of the afternoon. Well, I may go down past Tate's Beach, so perhaps it's just as well if you don't try to come. You might get too tired."

A little later in the afternoon, when Kenneth had departed down the beach with his rod and fishing kit and Sanford could be heard hammering and filing out in the little garage, Mercedes took her book and issued forth from the cottage. But she did not turn her steps toward the beach. Instead she faced in the direction of the Bay and could have been seen, had there been anyone to notice, to have entered the lane that led past the old Shaw mansion.

Near the gate she passed one of the Coast Guards, old Mr. Yates, who saluted her with a "Good-afternoon!" and stopped for a moment of chat.

"Going over to the Bay?" he inquired. "You'll find it quieter and warmer there with this northeast wind. Kind of rough on the ocean front. Lickin' up for a storm, I reckon—a good three- or four-day one, or I ain't no weather prophet. I've just been snoopin' round the Shaw place—Captain's orders—to see if there's anything new afoot. All quiet there to-day, anyhow.

Queer doings, though—the old lady beatin' it out of here like that! I've knowed her to do it before—several times—but there warn't no such rumpus as this kicked up about it."

"Mr. Yates, what's she like—that old lady?" asked Mercedes on a sudden inspiration. "I've never seen her, you see. Did you ever know her very well? I'm quite curious about her."

"Why, I'll tell you," answered the surfman, pulling out his watch and glancing at it uneasily, "I've seen her quite a bit during the past twenty years or so. I've been on this station longer even than the Captain, and I've heard more or less a good deal of talk about her. But I'm sorry I can't stay to tell you about it right now. I'm due on tower watch in about five minutes. But I'll take a spell during some of my off time soon and tell you about it, if you care to hear. She certainly is a queer one—that old lady. Good-afternoon, miss!"

He touched his cap and was gone, leaving Mercedes standing where she was and quite consumed with curiosity to hear what Mr. Yates had to tell. Presently she resumed her walk, but stopped at the gate of Windy Hollow and looked about her to see whether there was any-

one else in the vicinity. But the region was deserted, and she turned in at the gate and whisked up the veranda steps and in through the hall door, which she closed carefully behind her.

It was the first time since the night of her arrival that she had been alone in this eerie place, and she shivered slightly and glanced about her a little timidly. But it was evident that she was bent on some definite errand, for she wasted no time, but went straight to the kitchen. And the first thing she did there was to walk over to the sink and try the pump.

To her great disappointment, it did not work, for the handle only wobbled up and down loosely with a hollow sound. Then she remembered that Mrs. Matson had told her that pumps often had to be primed or started with a little water being poured down into them, especially when they had not been used for a while. So she took a tin hand basin that hung by the sink and stepped out of the kitchen door to fill it at a rain barrel that stood near.

But she did not prime the pump with the rain water. Instead she looked about her for a cloth or rag of some kind, and having found one in

an old work basket standing on a side table, she took both it and the basin and turned with them toward the front hall and the stairs going up to the floors above. On the second floor she did not stop but continued up the next flight. And at the step near the top, where at the side underneath were the telltale finger prints, she put down the basin, moistened the rag in water, and carefully and deliberately wiped out the marks, so that no vestige of anything save a damp spot remained. Then she carried down the basin and rag to the kitchen, put the basin where it belonged and the rag in the stove.

After that she picked up her book, went out of the front door, and continued her walk over to the Bay.

CHAPTER XV

SOME SIDE LIGHTS ON ANNE SHAW

BUT Mercedes did not remain very long at the Bay. It was sheltered from the wind, and very calm on that side, but the mosquitoes were proportionately thick and annoying. After sitting for half an hour on an overturned boat and slapping them continuously while she tried to read, she decided that life under such conditions was unendurable and betook herself back to the ocean.

The wind had dropped somewhat when she got to the dune side again, so she picked out a sheltered nook on the lee side of one and settled down once more to read. From the tangle and mystery in which they had become involved, she deliberately turned away her mind for a while, choosing to rest it by letting it move in some quite different channel. For she felt so bewildered and confused by it all that she could no longer think clearly about anything. At last

the thunder of the breakers on the beach lulled her into a doze, and she presently fell fast asleep.

She was awakened by the feeling that someone was standing near her and roused up to perceive Mr. Yates just about to turn away along the beach.

"I beg pardon, Miss Mercy," he apologized. "I saw you come here to sit whilst I was on tower watch, and when I came down I thought it would be a good time to come over and tell you what you were asking me a piece back. I've a while free and I wouldn't mind sitting down quiet for a spell. But I see you were asleep when I got here and I was just going back. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Oh, don't go, please!" she exclaimed. "I was only just cat-napping, and I'm really very anxious to have you tell me what you were going to. I couldn't stand it over by the Bay—too many mosquitoes."

He sat down beside her and took a pipe from his pocket. "Don't mind if I smoke, do you? Sort of rests me and clears my mind after a hard day's work." Mercedes assured him that she didn't, and he filled his pipe and puffed away

in silence for two or three minutes. At last between two puffs, and shaking his head portentously, he began:

"Queer doings around here lately—queer doings! The Captain don't seem so much impressed with 'em, but I tell you, Miss Mercy, I know there's something wrong over there"—he nodded toward Windy Hollow—"and you'll never make me think anything different till that Anne Shaw comes back—if she ever does!"

"That's just the way I feel, Mr. Yates," agreed Mercedes, "but I know so little about its past history that it's hard for me to make any sense out of the thing. I'd be so glad if you would tell me a little about that old lady, if you will. She must have been always a queer sort of a person."

"She was—she was just that," nodded the old surfman, "at least for the past thirty years or so. Though I've heard tell that back before that she was a pretty fine sort of a woman—and a mighty handsome one, too. You never saw her, did you?"

"No," said Mercy, "at least, not close by. I have a feeling that it was she I saw up in the cupola that first night, but it was only just a

glimpse, and it was getting on toward dark, too. I just saw a face with a lot of white hair around it, and I couldn't even see the features. What did she look like?"

"She's rather good-looking even now, with big black eyes and a lot of white hair around her face, sort of curly or wavy like. She's small and rather thin and doesn't stoop at all, though she must be going on to eighty. But when I first come here—that must be nigh on to twenty-five years ago, she was a handsome woman, and her hair wasn't as white as it is now—hardly even gray. She was living all alone here and was queer even then. But she always kept to herself. Folks said she had ever since her husband and son died some five or so years before that. Them that was at the Station then told me her husband had been a government pilot in New York Harbor, and he got drowned one time changing from his pilot boat to a steamer in a big storm. And not long before that she'd lost her son down in Cuba in the Spanish-American War, so the poor old lady had been pretty hard hit.

"Anyhow, when I first came here she was just as queer as she is to-day—kept to herself all the time, and nobody would ever ask her a

personal question. I never tried it but once. I was coming by the house one evening and noticed she had a lamp lighted, up in one of them windows that face south. She was just coming back to the house with a pail of water from that pump, and I asked her what she had the light burning up there for. She gave me a queer look, but all she said was, 'because it looked cheerful.' I never asked her about it again. And what she was gazin' at through that spyglass I never did have the courage to question her about.

"Then, one day, after I'd been here a short while, blest if she didn't disappear—not like she did this time, with all this fuss and upset, but just quietly like. One evening she was here just as usual—next morning she was nowheres to be found. House all left just as it was—doors shut but not even locked—and not a word or a peep out of her about where she was goin' or how long she expected to be away. We sort of kept an eye on the place for a couple of days—no, I guess it was nigh on to a week—and then back she come. Just appeared there again one morning—must have come in during the night. Anyhow, there she be—but with this difference. Her

hair, which had been black as a crow's wing when she went off, had a big white streak right down the middle of it. Looked the queerest you ever see!"

"How strange!" murmured Mercedes. "Didn't anyone ever ask her about it?"

"Nary a one of us would've dared!" laughed Mr. Yates. "Anne Shaw had a right sharp tongue in her head even in those days, and no one was askin' her any unnecessary or personal questions! She did let on to the Captain (the one that was here at that time, Morehead was his name) that she'd been sick for a few days with a fever, but that's as much as we heard about it. Anne Shaw knew how to keep her own counsel. She's had us guessing here for years."

He paused to refill and light his pipe, and then puffed on it meditatively and in silence for several quiet moments. And Mercedes meanwhile was busy turning over his queer revelations in her mind.

"Did she ever disappear again—till this time?" she finally asked.

He scratched his head thoughtfully before replying. "Yes, one other time, so I've heard. It was about five years later or so and I was away

on a six-months' leave to get over a bad spell of rheumatism I'd had. So I don't know nothing about it personally—only what I heard tell later. They said she went off to town one day to do her marketing, leaving everything just as usual, and never come back for three or four days that time. No explanations, of course. But there was this difference that time. For a while after she seemed more cheerful than anyone had seen her before. When the surfmen would go by on their duties over to the Bay, they swore they heard singing sometimes in that house. First they thought it couldn't be her, but when they listened more careful, they knew it was her voice.

"But that didn't last long. By the time I come back on duty it was all back to the usual again, and Anne Shaw was her old self, only worse'n ever. Grouchy as the dickens an' wouldn't speak to no one if she could help it. And so she's been for years till now. I've always thought there was something hangin' over her life in some queer way—threatenin' her—or something."

He fell silent again, puffing at his pipe and watching the little teeter snipe scuttling along the edge of the surf. Mercedes too was quiet,

thinking over all the curious things he had told her. Presently she asked:

"Mr. Yates, did you see the strange note that Sanford got in the mail this morning?" He said he had not heard about it, so she told him about it and its contents and asked him if he had any idea who could have sent it.

"Well," he answered after deep thought and some attention to the way his pipe was drawing, "if you ask me, I'd say offhand it was Bennie. Though where he'd get to a typewriter beats me—there's one in the Station but it's locked up when the Captain ain't usin' it, nor how he'd get it to mail at Toms River. He ain't been there in weeks—to my certain knowledge. He seems mixed up in this thing somehow, but I'll say this much for the boy—I don't see no harm in him. I think the Captain is too hard on him, too. And everyone's hand seems against the lad, somehow. But I like the chap, and I hate to see him picked on all the time like he is—only I wish some of the things he does didn't look so shady. I kind of think he's mixed up in something somehow against his will, and he's gettin' more tangled up all the time."

It warmed Mercedes's heart to hear Bennie

championed in this fashion. On a sudden impulse she turned to the old surfman:

"Oh, Mr. Yates, I'm so glad to hear you speak that way about Bennie. He seems to me such a nice boy—and somehow—such an unhappy one. How long has he been here, and how did he happen to come—do you know?"

"He ain't been here more'n about a year—yes, just about a year ago, now, he come. Said he was from somewheres down further along the coast—Virginia Capes or thereabouts—got transferred up here from that station. I will say he ain't shown no special aptitude for his work, but then a lot of 'em don't nowadays. His heart just ain't in it at all, and why he chose this line of thing for a job the Harry only knows. He seems cut out for something quite different. I see the picture of a marine engine he'd drawed a plan of awhile back. 'n' it was a crackerjack, all right. That boy's got somethin' in him, but it ain't Coast Guard work, I'll be bound."

"Sanford told me," volunteered Mercedes, "that Bennie has seemed to be over at the Shaw place a good deal, off and on, doing things for old Mrs. Shaw, and I've wondered why."

"I noticed that too," went on Mr. Yates, "and

one time I asked him about it—how come he was willing to do errands for her and that kind of thing, when it was as much as the rest of us could do to say two words to her or pass the time of day when we went by. He said he saw her one day trying to prop up a chicken house that had blowed down in a big wind the night before. She let him do it because it was pretty heavy going for an old lady like her, and ever since he'd felt kind of sorry for her, and she'd let him run around and do things for her. Somehow, though I believe he was tellin' the truth—as far as it went—it warn't the *whole* truth, by a jugful! There's something behind it all."

Again there fell a silence, and Mr. Yates got to his feet, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and said his time of leisure was over and that he must be getting back to some work at the Station. Mercedes thanked him for telling her what he had and watched him trudge away back to the Coast Guard Station with the feeling that his talk with her had made it a pretty enlightening afternoon, and wondered what Kenneth and Sanford would say if they could know all that she had learned. While she was speculating on their return and whether she would

tell them what Mr. Yates had imparted to her, she saw Bennie come hurrying toward her with a mysterious, almost furtive air. When he reached where she sat he touched his cap and panted breathlessly:

"I can't stay, Miss Mercy—I'm supposed to be on duty now. But there was something I wanted to tell you—and ask you. Will you please read this?"

He thrust a half sheet of notepaper, folded, into her hand and hurried away on his patrol down the beach.

CHAPTER XVI

MERCEDES GOES IT ALONE

MERCEDES took the note he had left in her hand and watched him with considerable atonishment as he plowed his way down the beach. Then she unfolded the slip of paper, and her surprise increased tenfold. For it read:

"I'm in an awful jam, Miss Mercy, and I think only you can give me any help. You were so kind to me this morning, and I think you understand that I'm all tangled up in something I can't talk about, but that I don't mean any harm and am trying not to do anything wrong. Perhaps there'll come a time later when I can explain all about it. Will you trust me till then? It's this way. Unless I can have the coast clear at the old Shaw house to-night, something's going to go awfully wrong and something terrible may happen that everyone would be sorry

about. I can't explain about it. The thing would take too long, and it isn't my secret to tell. But if you could fix things so your brother and Skinny wouldn't go over to the house to-night —keep their minds on something else, I mean —I think everything might come out all right. Perhaps I shouldn't do it, but I can't help depending on you.

"B. M."

Mercedes dropped the note in her lap and sat staring out at the gray ocean. The faith Bennie had placed in her and the request he had made of her were so surprising that for a time her mind would not function at all. Then she took up the note again and read it through slowly and carefully, trying to plan out what she ought to do and how she could fulfill his request if she decided that it were right to do so. She could not help but realize with a guilty sense of what almost amounted to treachery that she would be deceiving Kenneth and Sanford were she to accede to Bennie's plea. But then, she argued to herself, the boys did not know a number of things that she had learned, and were deeply prejudiced against the lad. She doubted

whether, even if she disclosed to them some of her newest discoveries and theories, it would make the slightest difference in their determination to hound Bennie into the last ditch. For one moment she had almost determined to tell them everything and beg them to leave Bennie to his own devices for one night. But even as she thought of it she realized how useless it would be.

No, for a while yet she must keep her own counsel and do what she could to divert them sufficiently to distract their minds from the night's doings at the Shaw house. But how was it to be accomplished? She buried her face in her hands and tried to think it out. Useless, she knew, to attempt to keep them indoors that evening— on any plea. For a time she thought of suggesting a fishing party for them all down the beach. This she felt would be scarcely worth proposing. Kenneth had been off fishing all the afternoon, and, unless his luck had been unusually good, he would be tired and ready for some other form of diversion after supper.

She next thought of proposing that they all go over to the Bay and out in Sanford's garvey for a run in the twilight. But she remem-

bered that Sanford had complained, last time he used the boat, that some (to her) inscrutable part of the motor was out of order and he would not use her again till it was fixed. So that idea had to be discarded. As a last resort she considered proposing after supper that they all get into Kenneth's car and go to some one of the larger accessible towns to the movies. But further thought soon discouraged her with this notion. The road to Orrstown was so very bad that Kenneth had declared nothing would induce him to use his own car again on it till they left for good. And, furthermore, she felt certain that movies in any locality, be they never so fascinating, would be totally inadequate to attract either one of the boys away from an engrossing mystery such as they had right in their own vicinity. She *must* think of some other means.

After a long interval there came an inspiration. Nothing, she felt sure, outside of some serious consideration, would divert the two boys from an excursion over to Windy Hollow that night. She had heard them planning it shortly after dinner and concocting elaborate schemes for the rounding up of any intruder who might venture into the locality that night. But if, for

instance, something serious could happen, such as her own temporary disappearance, it would surely draw them off in some other direction and leave the coast clear for Bennie.

But how was she to go about it? She sat for a while longer perfecting a plan. Then she looked at her wrist watch, noting that it was nearly five o'clock, collected her book and belongings, and went back to the cottage. Mrs. Matson was busy getting supper, and Sanford was still out wrestling with the problem of a balky car. Mercedes went to her room for her heavy sweater, in the pocket of which she prudently concealed her little electric torch. And under her arm she carried a magazine and a package of sweet crackers that she happened to have in her room. Then she went out to the kitchen and informed Mrs. Matson that she was going to walk down the beach and meet her brother as he came up from his fishing expedition.

"Well, don't go too far, dearie," Mrs. Matson warned her. "Supper'll be ready by six, and you know your brother's apt to be late if the fishing's good. If you don't see him, you turn around so's you'll get back here by six, or we'll

begin to worry. Besides, it looks to me like it's coming on a hard storm."

Mercedes thanked her and went out, without committing herself, and turned toward the ocean and the southward reaches of the beach. She had thought to munch her crackers as she trudged along, but decided to save them for later emergencies. She noticed that the sky looked very threatening, and that the ocean was lashing in with ominous fury, and wished that she had brought a slicker with her as well as the sweater. But as this would have looked as if she intended to be out longer than she wished to give the impression, she had to be content without it, even if it meant a thorough drenching.

The tide was low, and she could walk at the edge of the surf on the hard sand, but the breakers were pounding in with such intensity that they were often driven well up the beach, and she had much ado dodging them and trying to keep her feet dry. Occasionally she did not quite manage it, as her mind and her gaze were concentrated down the beach, where she was watching for her brother to appear. Of all things that she did not wish, it was for him to

catch sight of her first—or, for that matter, at all. In order to avoid this contingency, she climbed the high dunes a number of times that she might see from a long distance whether he was approaching.

At last she saw his figure in the distance, hardly more than a small speck approaching from the south, and she dropped down flat on the dune where she was, behind a clump of low bushes, awaiting his approach. He was walking slowly, as if very tired, and it seemed to Mercy as if it took him forever to reach the point opposite where she lay concealed. Her watch already indicated six o'clock, and she wanted him to get back to the cottage in good season, before there had been time to be too much question about her prolonged absence.

At length he came abreast of her hiding place, passed it, and she could see that he had a couple of fair-sized weakfish slung over his shoulder. She could also hear him whistling contentedly. When he had got well past her and would no longer be likely to turn or observe anything behind him, she got to her feet and scuttled in behind the dunes and turned in the direction of the Bay. At this point she deliberately dropped a

little initialed handkerchief of her own and, that it might not blow away, anchored it with a handful or two of sand. Then she trudged over to the Bay shore, making a winding and deviated track of footprints, that were quite distinct in the untrodden sand.

On the shore of the Bay, at the edge of a thick clump of woods—an all but impenetrable thicket of cat briars, bay, and scrub cedar—she dropped a magazine that she had been carrying and forced her way into the tangle. The long, sharp thorns caught on her sweater, ravelled it in two or three places, and tore a long strand of worsted from one sleeve. She left the strand clinging to the bushes and plunged on.

After wallowing about for a time in a marshy stretch, she next emerged from the woody patch in quite a different locality from where she had entered it, and zigzagging her way through the less dense growth between ocean and Bay, she worked her way farther and farther down toward the south till she had passed the line of the Halfway Tree and was well below it. Sometimes she turned back on her tracks or went round in wide circles; and a more confusing course than hers it would have been hard to

imagine. It was with almost a chuckle that she pictured the boys, hot on her trail after they found the handkerchief, circling round and round fruitlessly in the maze she had invented for them. Then her conscience smote her as she realized the way they would feel about the trick she was playing them.

"But it's in a good cause—really," she reminded herself. "Or at least I *hope* it is! And I can explain it all to them afterward."

She had intended to work her way farther and farther down, in wide circles, till she was close to the Tate's Beach Station. Further than that she had not planned, as she reasoned that it would take the boys well on into the evening to trace her thus far, and by the time they all got back they would probably be so exhausted that not even so absorbing a mystery as the Anne Shaw one would induce them to do anything but tumble into bed.

But it had taken her a long time to penetrate through the maze of cat briar through which she had laid her course. When she emerged from it, she realized that the storm was beginning in earnest. Raindrops, which had only spattered occasionally on her face in the thicket and swamp,

began coming down in hard, pelting slashes. And added to that, the wind, now dead northeast, began to whip sand all about her, driving it into her face, down her neck, around her feet, with relentless, cutting fury. Until there was some kind of a lull, it was useless to think of going farther. She must find some sort of shelter, and that speedily, and wait there till the worst of the downpour was over.

But where was she to find it? She stared about her helplessly for a time, trying in vain to penetrate the gray curtain of rain. Even the thicket of cedar and cat briar would be no shelter in such a downpour as this. Already she was drenched and shivering with chill and had even begun to wish madly that she had never been minded to embark on such a harebrained enterprise.

Suddenly her eye fell on a bent and gnarled old cedar tree not very far from where she stood. It was twisted into such a peculiar shape that once seen could not be easily forgotten. And somehow it had a strangely familiar look.

"Why, it's the old tree right near Cushman's shack!" she exclaimed aloud. "And I didn't suppose I was anywhere near there. The shack

can't be very far away—it's over nearer the ocean, if I remember rightly. I'll go in there till the worst of this is over."

She groped her way through the wet sedge and bushes, blinded and breathless from the fiercely driven rain and wind as she faced the northeast. And it seemed to her little short of a miracle when she finally saw the tiny building looming ahead of her through the downpour. With almost a sob of relief she reached the doorstep, groped for the latch, and let herself into the dark interior, shutting the door behind her, for which she had to use all the strength she possessed, so terrible was the pressure of wind that held it open against her. But at last the latch had caught, and she stood, drenched, breathless, but unutterably thankful, in the dense blackness of the interior.

With her back against the door, she stood, groping in each pocket of her sweater to find the little electric torch she had put there before leaving the Matson cottage. But the torch was not in her pockets. Evidently it had fallen out somewhere when she had been scrambling wildly through the brush and tangle. It was gone, and she was without a light in the pitch blackness of

this strange hut, with the storm raging outside. When her first feeling of annoyance had passed, she remembered that over in a corner opposite the door, she had seen, on their former visit here, an old tin with some matches in it. She determined to grope her way to this, light one, and see if there were anything in the shack in the way of a candle, lamp, or lantern.

She had just moved to take the first step in that direction when there came to her a faint but perfectly distinct groan out of the blackness, and her heart stood still for very terror!

CHAPTER XVII

THE SEARCH IS ON

MEANWHILE, in Mrs. Matson's kitchen, preparations for the evening meal went on, till at last the Captain's wife went to the door of the cottage and rang a big bell, loud and long. In the office of the Coast Guard Station the Captain heard it, put away his ledgers and files, took his cap, and went across to his home. In the garage at the back Sanford heard it, abandoned his struggle with the intricacies of a balky motor, washed his grimy hands at a pump in the yard, discarded a pair of dirty overalls, and strolled into the living room, sniffing hungrily the wafted odors of fried Cape May goodies. The big clock on the wall pointed to five minutes after six. Sanford poked his head in through the kitchen doorway and inquired:

"Where's Miss Mercy? And hasn't Ken got back yet?"

"Mercy went out quite a piece back," his

mother informed him. "She said she was going to walk down the beach and meet her brother on his way back. I warned her not to go too far because he might be late and there was a storm coming up, too. But I'm afraid she's forgotten and gone on all the way down. Too bad! Her supper 'll all be spoiled. I'm going to put hers and Kenneth's aside to keep warm, but it won't be nearly so good. We'd better eat now while things are hot. I hope she doesn't miss him and get wandering around—specially on this stormy evening."

"No fear of that," commented Sanford. "She can't miss him if she keeps straight down the beach. Ken would never go off it. Cracky, but that fish smells good! Let's get to it."

They sat down to the meal and ate it without further comment on the absent ones, and Mrs. Matson put two heaping portions aside on the back of the stove. "My stars! Look how it's commencing to rain!" she exclaimed as she turned to wash the dishes. "Those two will be simply drowned before they get back. I *wish* I hadn't let Mercy go! I ought to 've known better."

"You couldn't 've kept her if she decided to

go," grinned Sanford, "so I wouldn't worry about it." And he dived out through the rain to give some further attenion to the car. It was nearly half an hour later that Kenneth came tramping in, rain-soaked and dripping, but happy and contented and keen for his supper.

"My stars! where's Mercy?" gasped Mrs. Matson when she saw he was alone. "Didn't she meet you?"

"Meet me?" exclaimed the astonished fellow. "I never saw a sign of her. Why? Did she go after me?"

Mrs. Matson explained the situation. And Kenneth scratched his head in utter bewilderment. "Why, she must have seen that it was beginning to rain and turned back before I came along," he said. "Perhaps she found it too hard going, facing the northeast wind as she would have to all the way up on the shore. It pretty near bowled me over once or twice. She may have gone inside the dunes or tried to come back through the middle, where it's sheltered with bushes and some trees. Yes, that must be it."

"But why isn't she here yet?" demanded Mrs. Matson. "She must have had ample time to get

back if she turned before meeting you—even if she came the other way. And the storm's fearful now!"

Sanford, who had come in himself during the discussion, also declared that it was strange she had not appeared long since and that they must go out and try to find her at once.

"Oh, there are a lot of bogs and quicksands she could get caught in down further!" groaned Mrs. Matson, genuinely alarmed. "Why did I ever let that child go off alone? Her mother would never forgive me."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Matson!" Kenneth comforted her. "What she proposed to do was perfectly all right. If she's strayed off somewhere else, that's not your fault but her own foolishness. You have nothing to blame yourself for. Besides, I'm certain she's all right. Just lost her way in this heavy rain, that's all. Just give me a sandwich or two, if you will, and a cup of coffee. I can't stop for a meal before I go out. I'll change to something dry and get my slickers while I'm waiting."

Sanford, who had run over to the Station while Kenneth was changing, came back to report that the man on tower watch had seen Mer-

cedes start down the beach and watched her at intervals till he reported that she had climbed up on a distant dune, shortly before Kenneth himself had appeared in the distance, and settled down evidently to wait for him. But at the time when Kenneth had got abreast of and passed that dune, the man on tower watch had been busy looking in the opposite direction at a ship that was having some difficulty making her way against the storm. So busy was he watching it that he had not looked in the southward direction for quite a time, and when he did he noticed that Kenneth was coming on alone and that there was no sign of his sister with him. Nor could he see any trace of her anywhere about as it was coming on to rain and growing very dark.

The three in the cottage stared at each other in blank amazement. What could have become of Mercedes, and why had she not joined her brother, as it had been obviously her plan to do?

"I tell you there's something queer about this," cried Kenneth. "Come on, Skinny! I won't even wait for the sandwich. We've got to get down there and see what's up. The poor kid may have hurt herself—broken her leg or some-

thing—and be lying out there in all this storm!"

He drained a cup of coffee that Mrs. Matson insisted that he swallow before leaving, took his sister's slickers over his arm, and they both rushed out of the house.

"Do you know about where it was that she was seen waiting on top of a dune?" panted Ken as they plowed their way out through the blinding rain toward the ocean.

"Yes, he said it was the one down near to the Halfway Tree where that old capstan is," bellowed Sanford, trying to make himself heard above the roar of the wind. "I left word that if we didn't get back fairly soon Dad was to send down the C. G.'s that are off duty, to give us a hand."

It was useless to attempt further conversation. They could only plow their way along, keeping watch as far as possible at every step for some sign of the missing girl. Fortunately the wind was at their backs and hustled them along, and they did not have to face the flying sand. But even at that the going was difficult.

"Gosh! I'm worried sick about the kid," Kenneth gasped at one point, stopping to mop the rain and wet sand from his face. "Mother'd

never forgive me if I let anything happen to her!"

"You're doing the best you can—and so are we all," Sanford comforted him. "It wasn't anything you could help. We'll find her, all right!" They plowed on through the storm without further comment. And the crashing of the mountainous breakers was the chief accompaniment to their anxious thoughts. Presently Sanford had an idea.

"We can't see very much—just walking along the surf edge," he shouted. "Suppose we go along the dune tops, and you keep your eye out toward the ocean, and I'll watch out over toward the Bay. In that way we won't miss anything." Kenneth agreed, and they scrambled up the dunes where, if the going was more difficult, they could at least see in all directions. But they saw no trace of the missing girl till they came at last to the old capstan, imbedded in the sand at the foot of one of the dunes. Here they noticed footsteps, now almost washed out by the rain, indicating that someone had gone over the dune top and beyond. And down in a clump of bushes at the foot, where it had blown, Sanford retrieved the handkerchief that Mercedes

had so carefully planted in the locality an hour or so before.

"Yes, it's hers, all right," Kenneth agreed, pocketing the sodden square of linen. "There's her initial, M, so there can't be any doubt about it. Now where on earth could she have gone from here, and why?" They stood uncertainly a moment, buffeted by the wind and rain, thinking it over.

"Do you s'pose she could have thought it might be easier walking back on the Bay shore because it's sheltered from the wind?" suggested Sanford at length.

"She might have," replied Kenneth, "but I can't see why, when she expected to meet me, she didn't wait till I came along and ask me about it. I'm certain it hadn't begun to rain when I passed here. It isn't like her to go off like that on her own hook without consulting me, and somehow it all looks darned peculiar. I don't like it. But come on. We'll follow this up anyway. If these are her footprints, they're disappearing fast."

They floundered across the strip of land between ocean and Bay, trying to read in the sand a record of where Mercedes had gone. Some-

what later Kenneth discovered the rain-soaked magazine, but it was far from where Mercedes had dropped it, having been blown out hither and yon by the fierce gale. He picked it up with a low whistle and beckoned to Sanford.

"Here's this!" he exclaimed eagerly. "It proves she got over this way, then, just as we thought. Perhaps it would be a good scheme to follow your idea that she tried to get back to the Station along the Bay shore. Suppose we start in right here on the shore and work our way down on this side. I've a notion she found it much easier going here and went back that way. And I've been thinking too about why she didn't wait for me when I was coming along, as the surfman said—she was still there on the dune when I was fairly near. It's just possible she may not have seen me and got worried because the wind was getting so strong and it was threatening to rain, and decided she'd walk back along the Bay and not wait for me."

"But there's one thing she doesn't realize," replied Sanford in a worried manner. "There's a bad, treacherous swamp and quicksand about half a mile farther up, on this side, and it goes straight down into the water. She could never

get through it, no matter how hard she tried—and she probably would try. She wouldn't know enough about it to realize she'd have to go 'way inland to get around it. If she got into that swamp—in a storm like this—goodness knows what might have happened."

"Holy cat!" cried Kenneth distractedly. "Let's make a bee line for the place, then, and not waste a minute. The poor kid's possibly caught in it and scared to death—if nothing worse!"

So they turned their steps toward the north and began to work their way along the shore of the Bay, which was no easy task. In many places the thick growth of groundsel and other shrubbery came down to the water's edge and, short of penetrating through or around it on the inside, there was no way of passing it except to wade. On other marshy stretches they sank ankle deep in ooze and lost their footing many a time on the slimy seaweed that lined the shore.

"Gosh! it doesn't seem as if Merce *could* have come this way!" panted Kenneth as he slipped for the twentieth time into a boggy hole under

the seaweed. "I sort of think we're crazy, Skinny, to be looking for her over here."

"We're right near that quicksand place," Sanford replied. "And though we haven't seen any trace of her along this way, we'd better go on till we come to it and make sure she isn't around there."

His advice was good, and they both renewed the struggle till they came to a sinister-looking stretch of bog, seaweed, and wet sand that Sanford indicated was the location he meant.

"I'll go poke around in it a bit," Sanford suggested—"I know the spots where it'll bear your weight and you stay here and keep an eye out for any signs of her. I won't be long."

He left his companion and began to penetrate into the swamp, leaping from hummock to hummock of firmer ground, till he was out of sight among some bushes that hid him from view. The slashing of wind and rain was not so fierce here as on the ocean side, but it was heavy enough, and in ever-increasing discomfort Kenneth stood his ground, staring about him fruitlessly and racking his brains to think of a reason why Mercedes should have been moved to do such an utterly crazy thing. Sud-

denly, above the howling of the wind, he was startled to hear a faint but distinct cry from Sanford:

"Oh, Ken! Ken! Hurry—*help!* I've slipped in!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CLUE OF THE SILVER SPECTACLES

THERE was only one thought in the mind of Mercedes Haynes when she heard that faint but perfectly distinct groan in the pitch darkness of the Cushman shack, and that was to get away from the awful spot without an instant's delay. Out of it—into the storm—the night—anything—anywhere to get away!

She stood with her back to the closed door, groping madly with one hand to find the latch. Where *was* it? *Why* could she not reach it, open the door, and make her escape? The tension on her nerves made her hands feel like sticks, totally unconnected with her body, and her feet like pieces of lead that might refuse to move. Why had she closed the door, anyway, before she knew what she might expect to find inside the hut? She remembered that she thought she had her torch with her and had intended to turn it on the moment she entered, and that she

had closed the door first because the rain was driving in. Well, it was too late to regret it now! Suppose that hair-raising groan came again! Where *was* the latch?

Weary with reaching back of her at that uncomfortable angle, her hand dropped downward and presently touched something at the side of the door that felt like the smooth surface of a table, and she remembered that there *had* been a small table at one side of the door. For a minute or two she let her hand rest on it before she started groping for the latch again. It was in that minute that her fingers suddenly came in contact with something that felt curiously familiar.

Could it be? No—yes. Even in the midst of her trepidation she could not resist the temptation to handle it again—indeed, she did it all most automatically. And when the realization came to her of what that object undoubtedly was, she almost forgot for an instant her terror and suspense. The object was a pair of spectacles!

There had been no spectacles lying on the table when she had last been in that hut with Sanford. Of this she was absolutely positive.

How had they come there since? To whom did they belong? The last pair of spectacles she remembered seeing were those of poor old Anne Shaw as they lay on the dining-room table at Windy Hollow before they had mysteriously disappeared. Could *these* be the same ones? She fingered them again but found herself unable to decide. They were the ordinary round lenses with metal rims, but it was impossible to tell more.

Suddenly she realized that she had lost her first terrible rigidity of suspense and terror. Though she longed to flood the shack with light and investigate the source of that nerve-racking sound she had heard, she no longer felt that she must burst from the place with all the speed she could muster. In the relief of the tension she boldly walked across the room and felt along the opposite wall for the shelf and the tin can of matches she had remembered there. True to her instinct, she touched the shelf almost immediately, felt along it, and came in contact with the can. And in its depths her fingers discovered four good, burnable matches!

Before leaning over to scratch one of the matches on the board flooring, Mercedes lis-

tened to catch any sound that might still come out of the darkness. Someone in that shack had groaned—plainly and distinctly. Where was that person? What would the lighted match reveal? She wanted to be prepared for anything, but first, and most important of all, she wanted to be prepared to escape. So she walked back to the door again, and in the calmness of returned reason and courage she sought and found the latch, set the door slightly ajar with the tip of her foot in it, then scratched the match on the surface of its wood. And in the feeble illumination of its glare she stared anxiously about her. Then she broke into an almost hysterical giggle of relief. Apart from herself, there was not a living soul in the shack.

Absolutely empty of human occupancy it stood, and the only sign of any differing condition from that which she had seen before was the pair of spectacles on the table. That they were those belonging to Anne Shaw herself she could scarcely doubt. They were apparently the same big silver-rimmed ones she had last seen lying on the table in the dining-room of Windy Hollow. But how had they come where they were? Could the old lady herself have put

them there? If so, where was she and how came she in this vicinity? And who had been the author of that perfectly audible groan? She began to think she must simply have imagined that groan. She had heard such things were possible when people were terribly wrought up.

But before she could think further the match went out, burning her fingers as it did so. She lighted another, determined this time to look about for a lamp or candle, as she had only two matches left. When the second flared up, she spent no more time gazing at the spectacles, but peered all about the small enclosure for what she desired. But apparently there was nothing of the sort in the hut. The second match went out, only half burned, fanned by a gust of wind that came through some loose boarding in the walls.

She scratched the third match with a feeling of desperation. There must be *something* in that hut to sustain a light, and find it she would. This time she determined to look for a piece of paper or old, dry wood that might be used as a torch. But the match had no sooner flared up than her eye fell upon exactly what she sought—a battered lantern standing on the floor near the

foot of the bed and almost concealed by something hanging from the side of the bed over it. With a little cry of delight she sprang forward to reach it—and in so doing extinguished the third match.

She had now exactly one match left and a lantern which she had no idea how to light. She prudently thought the matter over before risking her last match. She must find out how that lantern worked, somehow, before lighting her last match—that was certain. So she groped over to where the lantern stood, took it up and felt it over carefully, and tried to decide how a lantern was lighted. She had never tried to light one before in her life, nor even an ordinary oil lamp, for that matter, till she had come to the Matson cottage. But she reasoned that if the principle were the same the method must also be somewhat similar.

It took her a while in the darkness to discover that the glass shade of the lantern lifted in its framework, but that underneath were a wick and a device to turn it up and down the same as other lamps. When this was clear to her, however, she set it carefully on the floor, turned up the wick, and in fear and trembling struck

her match. In another instant, to her great joy, the wick had caught and the lantern was safely lighted.

When this was accomplished, Mercedes did something that astonished herself greatly. She sat down flat on the floor and burst into tears!

"Now, what on earth is the matter with me?" she demanded of herself, fiercely mopping her eyes. "Boohooing here like a baby just when I've got everything nicely fixed!" Nevertheless, in the relaxation of her overstrained nerves, she sobbed hysterically for two or three minutes more before she regained control of herself. Then she scrambled up from the floor, took the lantern, and proceeded to make a tour of inspection around the hut.

First she went over to the table and examined with care and detail the spectacles that lay there. They left not a doubt in her mind but what they were the property of the old lady of mystery. But, again, how came they to be where they were? And where had they been in the interval between the time they lay on the table in Windy Hollow and reappeared here? As there was no answer to the question, she went on with her inspection till she came around to the decrepit

cot in the corner. Then her heart stood still and she almost dropped the lantern in her astonishment. For across the foot of the bed was carelessly flung—*the old gray shawl* that had played so important a rôle in the drama!

There it lay, flung over the edge of the cot, and one end of it had partially hidden the lantern. That was why she had not noticed the lantern in the dim light of the first match. Forgetting everything else now, she went over to examine the shawl. There was no diminution of the storm outside, but she paid it no heed, so absorbed had she become in these new developments. She had hardly had time to do more than gather the shawl in her hands and observe that one corner had been torn away when there reached her ears another faint but perfectly distinct groan!

Mercedes stood still right where she was, the shawl still held in her hands. But she put the lantern down carefully on the floor, because her knees began trembling so that she wasn't sure she could remain standing. If it got any worse she would have to sit down on the cot or the floor herself. The sound did not come from within the room—nothing could be plainer than

that. Nor did it seem likely that it came from outside. To make sure of this, she took up the lantern and went outside, making a tour clear around the hut. Buffeted and blinded as she was by the still terrific wind and rain, she could still easily discern that there was nothing and no one outside that hut who could possibly have made such a sound.

A sudden idea struck her that it might be the wind howling through some crack that had caused the queer groaning noise, and she went back into the hut to ascertain if this could be so, setting the lantern on the table while she tiptoed about to examine the windows and walls. She was just investigating the possibilities of a partially closed old stove-pipe hole when her ear caught the words, muffled but perfectly audible:

"Why are you waiting so long?"

And all that had gone before was as nothing to the terror that seized her now!

There was someone in or near that shack! Or else all the old fables she had heard were true and the place was haunted. Words were distinctly heard—groans—yet the place was absolutely empty of human occupation except for

herself, and the surroundings outside were equally deserted.

"I won't stay here another minute!" she decided. "It isn't safe. I'll get out, no matter how hard it's storming, and get back to the cottage somehow and tell the boys. Then they can come down here if they want and investigate. But I won't. I'm just scared stiff!"

She was about to put her thought into action and had reached the door when a renewed groan and the words, "It's cruel—*cruel* to leave me here so long!" brought her to an instant pause. And almost involuntarily she herself called out:

"Where are you? *Who* are you?"

There was no response, but in the dead silence that followed, Mercedes could hear the beating of her own heart.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECRET OF THE CUSHMAN SHACK

NOTHING else broke the deathlike silence save the howl of the storm outside. But even in the midst of her terror Mercedes knew that there was, beyond a shadow of doubt, some living human being near by. And, more than that, she felt that she was on the verge of some great discovery, at last. The latter thought went far toward restoring sanity and calming her overwrought nerves.

She listened in breathless suspense for any further sound or comment from the voice of the unseen. But there was none. Then, when a little more courage had filtered back, she tried once more:

"I'm Mercedes Haynes. Who are you? Why won't you answer?"

Another long silence. Then, muffled, but obviously close by, came the reply:

"Who is Mercedes Haynes? What are you doing here?"

There was something indescribably eerie and weird in this carrying on a conversation with someone she could not locate, in a hut where there seemed no possibility of that unseen person being concealed, at night and in the midst of a terrific storm. Yet now that her first terrors for her own personal safety were abated there was something strangely elating about the adventure, too. So she plucked up still more courage and replied:

"I'm the girl who is staying over at Captain Matson's cottage with my brother Kenneth. I got caught in the storm right near here and came into this shack for shelter. I didn't know anyone was here. Won't you tell me who you are—and where?"

Again silence. The owner of the voice was obviously digesting this latest news. When it spoke again there was a distinct difference in its tone and a sort of tremulous eagerness that had not shown itself before. It answered quaveringly:

"Do you know anything about this—who I am?"

"I certainly don't!" declared Mercedes. "Who are you?" The reply almost took her breath away.

"I'm Anne Shaw. And I'm a prisoner here!"

The answer was so astounding that Mercedes found it almost impossible to reply at once. Here she was—with the key of the whole situation in her hands—and she actually did not know what to say or do! She could only stammer:

"Oh—but—but I don't understand! Where *are* you?"

The answer came from the unseen. "Move out the cot bed. You'll find a trapdoor."

Mercedes set the lantern on the table and proceeded to her task. First she moved the cot out from the wall against which it stood, to the middle of the floor. It was not heavy. All the time she was working at it, she was thinking, "Oh, what shall I do? Oh, I *wish* the boys were here! Suppose this is something dangerous!" Yet she knew that she could do no other than precisely what she *was* doing. When she had moved the cot she took the lantern and surveyed the floor underneath. It was covered deeply with sand but when she had brushed this aside she

saw that there were three broad boards on a hinge that were plainly the trapdoor. But on the other end there was also a substantial padlock, which investigation proved securely fastened.

"But you're locked in," Mercedes called out. "There's a padlock and it's locked. Do you know where the key is?"

There was a groan in answer to this, and then a feeble, "No, I don't. I was hoping it was fastened in some other way. Can't you find the key—anywhere around?"

Mercedes took the lantern and made a tour of the entire shack, examining in every nook and cranny, along every ledge and on every nail. The place was so small that the search did not take long, and it was fruitless.

"No, I can't find any," she called out, "and I've hunted everywhere. Who is keeping you locked in here, Mrs. Shaw?"

The latter part of her question was ignored and the only reply was another query—"Can't you break the lock?"

"I'll try," she assured the unseen. The heaviest available article she could find to use was a broken oar handle, but all her pounding with the unwieldy affair did not make the slightest im-

pression on the heavy padlock. At last she gave it up.

"I'm afraid it can't be done," she called down. "Isn't there any other way?"

"If you could find anything to do it with, you might unscrew the hinges of the trapdoor," suggested Mrs. Shaw.

Again Mercedes looked all about her. And this time her search was not in vain. In an old box on a shelf were a number of rusty carpentry tools, evidently long unused. Turning these over, she came upon a decrepit screw driver without a handle, and she informed the unseen woman of her treasure trove.

"Take it slowly," advised the muffled voice of Anne Shaw. "The trapdoor is old but the screws may not come out easily."

Mercedes set to work with renewed zest. It was not easy to manipulate the handleless screw driver, and, as Mrs. Shaw had said, new screws had evidently been put in quite recently and were therefore difficult to remove. While she worked, she was wondering furiously how such an astounding state of things could have come about, but Mrs. Shaw was too difficult a person

to question much, even if she had had the time or energy to do so.

The handleless screw driver was very rusty, and her unaccustomed fingers soon grew sore and weary trying to manipulate it, so she laid it down for a moment to flex and rest them. And lest the prisoner below should think she was discouraged with the task, she called down to Mrs. Shaw that she was just giving her stiff fingers a chance to relax for a moment. And in the silence it was rather to her surprise that Mrs. Shaw asked a question:

"Have they noticed I was away—up at the Station? Did anyone try to find me?"

"Yes," acknowledged Mercedes. "We've all been wondering where you were and were worried about you. Sanford Matson and I—were right near your house the night you disappeared."

There was no comment on this. Mercedes took up the screw driver again and resumed work. One hinge was now entirely free on one side, but the last two screws in the second were proving rather refractory. Once Mrs. Shaw inquired anxiously how she was getting on, and

Mercedes gave her the latest bulletin. Then the old lady made a disturbing statement:

"Better hurry all you can now. He may be in here any time and put a stop to all this!"

Mercedes made an involuntary exclamation of alarm and dropped her tool. "Oh, Mrs. Shaw," she cried, "whom do you mean by 'he'?"

"The one who is keeping me a prisoner, of course," replied the voice. "There's a good deal at stake behind all this."

Mercedes was now on the last screw. She called down excitedly:

"Well, we'll try to beat him. I've only one screw more. Oh, I hope no one comes before I'm through. If you are free we'll go right back along the dunes, in spite of the storm."

"Yes, we'll go back," agreed Mrs. Shaw. "When I'm in my house once more no one will ever dare do this to me again."

While she worked frantically on that last screw Mercedes decided to venture on a bold question. It was one that had been uppermost in her mind ever since she had made this tremendous discovery. Now at last she plucked up sufficient courage.

"Mrs. Shaw," she began hesitatingly, "I hope you don't think I'm asking what I shouldn't, but I'm deeply interested to know—more deeply than you think. Is—is Bennie Morris badly mixed up in all this? Has he done anything wrong?"

There was another long, long silence. This time Mercedes was sure she had done the wrong thing and spoiled everything by her too great curiosity. The last screw had just been loosened up from its moorings and begun to turn when Anne Shaw spoke again.

"I think you are a friend of Bennie's or I wouldn't answer that question. I think you don't mean him any harm. Everyone else seems to. Bennie *is* mixed up in it, as you say, but he's never done anything wrong. He's a good boy. He——"

But the old lady must have noticed Mercedes's cessation of action while listening for she added:

"Please hurry all you can. If I can get out of here and away before he comes, we may be able to save the whole thing. If not, it may be dangerous for you. He's pretty desperate. I can't explain now. Just *hurry!*"

With renewed haste, Mercedes worked frantically at the last screw. It rose finally from the boarding, and she was able to remove it completely with her fingers. The trapdoor was now free to be lifted. She had to pry it up, holding it by the loosened hinges, finding the weight of it more than she had calculated. But at last she turned it over on its still fastened side. Then, with the lantern in her hand, she peered down into the opening.

The sight she beheld astonished her. For underneath that trapdoor was another complete room, evidently an old cellar, tiny, to be sure, much smaller than the room above it, but still a room, with heavy boards holding back the sand, and furnished with a single narrow cot bed and a rickety chair. There was a battered tin tray with some dishes on it, containing the remains of food, standing on the floor by the bed.

But on the cot bed sat the object of all this strange quest herself—Anne Shaw. And Mercedes gazed at her in a fascination of wonder, beholding an elderly, white-haired, but still erect and alert woman, showing many signs of fatigue and of days of imprisonment, with her right arm evidently helpless and encased in a

sling made from a strip torn from her skirt. Her big black eyes looked enormous in the dim lantern light, and her curly white hair was in disarray from having had no attention in many days.

When she saw that she was at last free, the trapdoor finally removed, she arose slowly and painfully from the cot. But her manner and words were filled with suppressed excitement.

"There is a ladder up there somewhere," she said. "If you can find it and lower it down here, I can climb up. I'm stiff with rheumatism, it's so damp down here" (Mercedes noticed indeed that the floor of her tiny room was only damp sand. At no place on the beach was it possible to dig down more than a foot or two below the surface without striking dampness and ooze), "and my hand is injured, so I'll have to ask you to help me."

Mercedes found the ladder which she had previously noticed leaning against one of the walls, brought it to the opening and lowered it. When it was in place, she went down to help the old lady.

Anne Shaw, tottering from weakness, had

just placed her foot on the lowest rung of the ladder when they were both horrified to hear the sound of voices approaching outside the shack and the grating noise of the door being pushed open!

CHAPTER XX

THE PRISONER FREE

WITH the sound of voices and that opening door they were both paralyzed with surprise. Here they were, in a complete trap, and at the door some enemy unknown. They could not have been caught in a worse position. Mercedes uttered an involuntary little groan, and the old lady, though trembling herself with nervous excitement, whispered:

"Keep cool. He'll find us, sure enough. But I know what I'll say to let you out of this. Nothing can harm *you!*"

"But what about yourself?" questioned Mercedes, as the steps above entered the shack.

"Never mind about me," replied Anne Shaw. "When we get up there you just make a rush and get out. I'll be all right. I can take care of myself."

There was no time to say more. Two persons had entered the shack, and they heard the words:

"What's the meaning of all this?"

"What's the meaning of all this?"

Suddenly Mercedes sprang away from Mrs. Shaw with a shout of unutterable relief: *"Ken —Sanford!* Oh, I'm *so* glad it's you boys!"

In another instant two heads were thrust over the trapdoor opening, and in a combined glare of electric torch and lantern the woman and girl stood to face the astonished pair above. And for several minutes thereafter, there was a confused babel of questions and replies that led to nobody's very great enlightenment. Finally Kenneth commanded:

"Come! let us help you out of there. Mrs. Shaw comes first. Skinny, you get down there and give a hand from below and I'll raise her from above here. Be careful of her hand and arm. We'll try not to hurt you any, Mrs. Shaw."

With considerable difficulty they got the old lady up the precarious ladder and seated her gently on the cot. Then Mercedes clambered up unassisted. They all stood about and looked at each other wonderingly, and Mercedes demanded:

"How did you find me here? Did you trace me?"

"If it's not asking too much," Kenneth responded, "I'd very much like to know how you *came* here—and what's the meaning of all this? By every right you should be safely housed in the Matson cottage and about ready to go to bed. Did you lose your way? Why did you never get back—and how came Mrs. Shaw here?"

"That's something I don't know myself," countered Mercy. "But from what she says I think it's dangerous for us all to stay here. She's been kept a prisoner here and says he's coming back any time and then it would be a bad look-out for us all."

But at this point Mrs. Shaw herself interrupted:

"We needn't worry about that, I reckon, now that there are so many here. He'd be afraid to come in, even if he got here, seeing so many around. No doubt he'd sneak off without making himself known. Where's Bennie Morris?"

"We don't know," replied Sanford. "Back at the Station on duty, probably—that is, if he's where he ought to be."

"Well, I happen to know that he isn't," put in Mercedes unexpectedly. "At least, not if he's where he said he'd be. I don't know as I ought

to say anything about it, but I guess it's all right now. That's the reason I'm here, and it's a precious good thing I happened to be here, or Mrs. Shaw might have never got out!"

"I don't know your object, of course," replied Kenneth, evidently still nettled about something, "but you led us a pretty dance, I'll say! Poor Skinny here fell into the quicksand in the swamp and I thought I never would get him out. I hung onto him half an hour till I was pretty near exhausted, and at last he got a foothold on a sunken log or something and managed to climb out."

"Yes, and I'd have been in over my head, this minute, if it hadn't been for Ken!" put in Sanford. And his half-drowned and muddy appearance certainly bore out the truth of his statement. "But all this isn't telling us how Mrs. Shaw got here," he added. He looked toward her as he spoke, and they all noticed that the poor old lady was sitting with her head in her hands, her eyes closed as if with sheer exhaustion.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mrs. Shaw?" asked Mercy, concerned at her appearance.

"I haven't had a thing to eat in nearly twenty-four hours," groaned Anne Shaw. "It wasn't so bad when I was lying on the bed, but this exertion has made me weak, I guess."

"Oh," exclaimed Mercy guiltily, "how thoughtless of us not to ask you! I have a box of crackers here that I brought in under my arm. They may be rather wet. I don't know how I came to keep hold of them through all that storm, but I did. Do eat some of them."

She found the sodden box where it had dropped near the door and opened it, laying it in the old lady's lap. Anne Shaw devoured them ravenously, and it was plain that they went far toward saving her from fainting from sheer weakness and exhaustion. When there were none left, she announced:

"I'd like to get back to my house if it's possible. My hand and arm are very painful, but there's no reason why I can't walk."

"If you can wait a little while, Mrs. Shaw, I think it would be better," advised Kenneth. "The storm's pretty bad yet, and besides that, we left word for the Coast Guard fellows to come out after us, if we didn't show up fairly soon after we left, when we started out to hunt

for Mercedes. They ought to be along any time now, and then it will be easier for us all to help you, with that injured hand of yours. Meanwhile, we'll make you as comfortable as we can here."

They saw that she was not comfortable sitting on the side of the rickety cot, so they moved her to the deck chair and made it more usable with the old gray shawl and the pillow salvaged from her cot in the room below. And Mercedes rolled up her sweater and put it back of the old lady's head. The unaccustomed attention evidently quite touched her, but she only thanked them and then was silent. And in the quiet of the hut, with only the rain thundering down on the leaky roof, they all sat rather tongue-tied, now that the first excitement was over. Mercedes wanted to explain to the boys how she had come to be there, but she could not do so without involving Bennie, and that she did not wish to do. So she kept very quiet, and in the end it was Mrs. Shaw herself who broke the silence.

"Bennie Morris is a good boy," she began unexpectedly and to the complete astonishment of them all. "A good boy. He got wound up in all this because he couldn't help himself. If I'd

only known——" She interrupted herself suddenly and looked keenly at Mercedes.

"You said awhile back that you knew where Bennie was to-night and that that was why you were here. What did you mean by that?" she demanded.

Mercedes saw that it was at last time to conceal matters no longer. Yet she realized that she had to go very carefully. Mrs. Shaw did not know that the boys had been very inimical to Bennie and believed him involved in some pretty shady affair. It was hard to steer a course without committing herself. She wished that it had all been explained on both sides and that there were no more need to be diplomatic. Suddenly she decided not to mince matters.

"Why, it's this way," she declared, staring hard at Kenneth with an expression she had often used to him which meant that he was to ask no questions and she'd explain later. (What Sanford might think she could not predict, and could only trust to luck that he would have the sense to keep quiet and wait for his explanation also.) "Bennie came to me this afternoon and asked if I would see if I could do what I could to prevent any of us from going over to your

house to-night. He said he couldn't very well explain why, just then, and asked me also to keep it a secret. I knew that Ken and Sanford were planning to go there this evening to see if anyone were coming there that shouldn't. And I couldn't very well keep them away without telling what Bennie had said. So the only way seemed to be for me to appear to get lost and lead them as far away from Windy Hollow as possible. And that's what I did. I'm afraid I made an awful mess of it, but at least——"

Mrs. Shaw suddenly staggered to her feet and gripped Mercedes by the arm.

"Did you say Bennie was over at that house —*to-night?*" The girl was actually frightened at the suppressed agony—almost horror—in her voice.

"Why—yes," she faltered. "Is—is anything wrong about it?"

"Then I must get back there at once," declared Mrs. Shaw, with a determination they did not see how she was capable of in her obviously weakened state. "I can walk—it won't hurt me."

"Wait, Mrs. Shaw!" cried Sanford. "I think I know what we can do. I'll run over to the

Halfway Tree and telephone Dad to send down some boys with the Coast Guard motor boat. It won't take them twenty minutes to get here, and it will save you a lot of time, and this storm would have you exhausted if you tried to walk."

Mrs. Shaw sank back in her chair and nodded an assent. When she stood on her feet it was obvious to herself, as well as everyone else, that she was too weak to take any such walk as would have been before her in that storm.

"Very well—please do. Only tell them to *hurry!*" she muttered.

Sanford rushed out on his commission and was back shortly, announcing that his father was dispatching the boys with all speed. While they waited, they hoped that Mrs. Shaw would say something further for their enlightenment, but she was quite silent, save for one curious statement:

"There was something in the food I was given that made me drowsy all the time. I suspected it and didn't want to eat the stuff but I'd get too hungry and had to. I haven't had any food since last night, so I felt wider awake today. But it has all made me weak. It's just as well I won't have to walk."

Wild questions and surmises seethed in all their minds after that, but they somehow did not dare to probe any further into her affairs. She only added, "Those crackers gave me some strength." And after that there was silence till they heard the voices of the surfmen approaching from the Bay. Sanford went out and warned them not to be curious or ask her any questions, and the party devoted itself to wrapping her up and getting over to the boat with all the speed possible.

It was a rough and wet journey back. Once or twice Mercedes feared the boat was going to be swamped, but they landed at last at the foot of the path that led from the Bay past Windy Hollow. Sanford and Kenneth helped Mrs. Shaw and Mercy ashore, told the surfmen to report their safe arrival at the Station and escorted Mrs. Shaw along to her house, where all seemed as usual, dark and silent and deserted. At the gate Mrs. Shaw thanked them for their rescue of her but said she was now at home and would no longer need any assistance. It was plain she was deeply anxious to be rid of everyone and go in alone. But Kenneth would not hear of this.

"You are not strong enough, after your experience, Mrs. Shaw, to be left there alone. Let us at least go in with you and light a fire and see that you are comfortable and have had something to eat before we leave you."

She gave consent to this at last, with great reluctance, and they all turned in at the front steps together. But as they ascended the steps of the veranda and the boys turned on their flashlights, she uttered a cry of horror and shock. For on the veranda, half in and half out of the open doorway, lay the form of Bennie Morris, eyes closed, a deathlike pallor in his face, blood trickling from an ugly gash in his forehead.

"I knew it—I knew it!" moaned the old lady, as they all bent over the unconscious lad. "I felt it all the way coming back. I knew harm would come to him. He's dead!"

But Kenneth, who had been feeling his pulse and loosening his collar, spoke to her quietly:

"He isn't dead, Mrs. Shaw. He has a pulse—a very faint one—and I don't think that wound in his head is serious. It looks like a scalp wound that hasn't gone very deep. Let's get him indoors and see if we can't bring him around."

Wondering why the old lady was taking such a deep interest in the young surfman, they got him indoors, and Anne Shaw insisted that they lay him on her bed in the room off the dining room. Mercedes found and lighted a lamp, and they all set to work to revive him, rubbing and slapping his hands and bathing his face with cold water. Bennie finally rewarded their efforts by opening his eyes and surveying them all with utterly bewildered gaze.

"How—where did you all—come from?" he feebly demanded. But suddenly his gaze was riveted on Mrs. Shaw, and he struggled to his elbow in absolute amazement.

"How—how——?" he stammered, but added, "Oh, he got it! *He got it somehow!*—And then he got me,—Oh, *my head!*—it's splitting!" And he fell back exhausted, clutching his head with both hands.

Mrs. Shaw laid her hand on his head in an awkward gesture of affection. "Never mind, Bennie!" she half whispered. "Just you get over this, and we'll try and get it set right somehow." But Bennie had fainted again and did not hear her.

With renewed efforts they brought him to

once more, groaning and in great pain, and bound up his head with some clean cloths. In the interval Sanford had made a fire in the kitchen range and heated some water, and Mrs. Shaw directed Mercedes where to find some tea and crackers in the pantry. They made Bennie swallow a cup of hot tea, which seemed to relieve him so much that he dropped into an exhausted doze.

And at this stage of affairs, without a preliminary knock, the kitchen door opened and a complete stranger walked into the room.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MYSTERY OF ANNE SHAW

WHEN Anne Shaw saw the intruder, she clutched the edge of the table, her eyes staring from her head, and gasped: *"You—here?*—Oh, go away—quickly! These—these are friends. They'll promise me not to say anything."

The man—a tall, iron-gray-haired man singularly like Bennie Morris in appearance—removed his dripping hat and came over to Anne Shaw. And then, regardless of his rain-soaked slickers, he put his arms around her and wrapped her in an unashamed embrace. And to the further astonishment of the onlookers he remarked quite audibly:

"It's all right, Mother! We needn't try to keep the secret any longer. I've found them at last. Where's Bennie—and where have *you* been all this time?"

Mrs. Shaw made no reply, but she did what

she had probably never done in all her life before—fainted dead away.

The storm had cleared by the following morning, and the day dawned in a burst of brilliant, unclouded sunshine. After a late breakfast, Mercedes went out to sit on the dunes, a book in her hand, more from habit than from any intention to read, for her mind was still in a maddening whirl of unanswered speculation, after the startling events of the night before. Presently Kenneth joined her, his fishing rod in his hand, and she turned to him with some heat:

"I think it's time, Kenneth Haynes, that someone explained to me what that affair last night was all about! As usual, I got taken back to the Matson cottage and told to go to bed just when things had got most exciting and you and Sanford could return there and clear up the whole thing. And then, this morning, you propose to go fishing and leave me still in the dark. I call it too mean!"

Kenneth stuck his rod in the sand and flopped down beside her, selecting as usual a blade of grass to chew. "Poor kid!" he sympathized. "I suppose it did seem like kind of a raw deal, but

after we got Anne Shaw around again, I thought she and her son would probably want to be alone, so I proposed that we had all better get home to bed, as the excitement seemed over. It was fearfully late, too. And after we'd landed you, we had to go over to the Station and explain things to Captain Matson.

"We were trying to get things straightened out with the Captain when who should walk in but Mrs. Shaw's son himself and began to tell us all about the affair, so naturally I didn't do a thing but stay there and listen. And I'll have to say that you did a pretty good stunt last night and probably saved the old girl's life when you got her out of that hut."

"But I didn't know she was there when I started out," Mercedes countered. "Of course, I couldn't do less than help her when I got in and found her. Only it was quite an accident. But do tell me all about it, Ken dear. I'm so wild to know the explanation of it all that I'm fairly sick from waiting!"

"Well, it's a long story, and I'm not sure I've got it all straight. But I see I might as well give up hopes of any peace till I've unloaded it, so here goes!

"It seems that, a good many years ago, Mrs. Shaw's husband was a government pilot in New York Harbor. They had a son, too, a young fellow of about eighteen or so at the time the Spanish-American War broke out. Anne Shaw and her son lived down here and the father would come down when he could get away. It was the old ancestral home of the Shaws, I believe. Anyhow, everything seemed to be running smoothly and happily till the Spanish War started. Then the young son, whose name, by the way was Benjamin—or Bennie—too, was crazy to get into it and proposed to go off and enlist in the Naval Reserve.

"Mrs. Shaw didn't like it, of course, but the father gave his consent. Just before the young fellow went up to New York to enlist, his father came down for a short leave, bringing with him a 'buddy' of his, another pilot named Daniel Christie. The Captain here at the Station at that time was a fellow named Morehead. He was an unpleasant, peculiar sort of a cuss, I guess, and nobody seemed to like him. Mrs. Shaw always hated him, but he used to come over and see her husband frequently when he was down on his leaves. He came over quite a lot while

Christie was there, for he knew Christie pretty well too.

"Well, to make this story as short as possible, the night before Mr. Shaw was to go back he was taken very ill and was unable to leave. But Christie was to return, and the young son was to go up with him and enlist. But here's where the trouble came in. Shaw had with him some important secret War Department maps of New York Harbor defenses. These were particularly important at that time because the Spanish fleet under Cervera was out around loose somewhere and nobody knew just where it was going to turn up. Shaw wanted to get these maps back safely to his New York office, so he handed them over to Christie to return, taking a receipt for them, as is customary. Then Christie and the young fellow left that next morning.

"Shaw was ill about three weeks and was convalescing, when Christie came down for another short visit. While he was here, Captain Morehead was back and forth from the Station a lot. He seemed to be quite thick with this Christie. Suddenly two men came down from New York to see Shaw and Christie, and both

pilots told Mrs. Shaw they must return to the city with these men immediately, on important business for the Service. Shaw himself got up from a sick bed to go.

"The next Anne Shaw knew she had word that the maps Christie had been supposed to return were missing and had been turned up by the Secret Service three weeks later in Cuba, where they had been sold or were about to be sold to the Spanish government. Christie had accused Shaw of having planned to sell them to the Spaniards and given them to Bennie to deliver to the Spanish authorities down there. Bennie had been arrested in Cuba and brought back for trial, but they had both somehow managed to escape out of the country and were fugitives from justice.

"It was Captain Morehead who brought this news to Mrs. Shaw. He said he'd learned of it through his Sandy Hook headquarters. He warned her that she must not try to communicate with them in any way, as she too was being carefully watched by the Secret Service. The poor woman nearly died, of course, of the disgrace of the thing."

"But I don't understand," interrupted Mercy.

"Didn't you say Mr. Shaw had given the maps to Christie and received a receipt for them? Why didn't he show that receipt?"

"I'll tell you why in a minute. Bennie had been down in Cuba in the Service at the time, and Shaw hadn't a thing to show in the way of a receipt, so things looked pretty shady for them both.

"Anne Shaw didn't believe a thing of this, of course, but she was helpless. The time went by, and the war ended, and she had heard nothing from them. You see they wouldn't dare communicate with her, as the mails would be watched all the time. People began to ask curious questions of her about them, so she invented a story that Bennie, the son, had died of yellow fever down in Cuba, and that her husband had been drowned in a storm while changing from a steamer to his pilot boat, and that they'd never found his body.

"It's no wonder the poor lady began to get queer—living all alone here under such a cloud. I suppose she was always hoping they'd come back, and that was why she kept a light burning every night in one of the windows. Kind of pathetic! And she probably thought they

might try to get to her somehow by boat, so that was why she spent a lot of time in the tower staring around with the old telescope.

"It was about five years later, I believe, when she received a mysterious message (I can't remember now just how it came, but it wasn't through the mails) to go down to some place near the Virginia Capes if she wanted to hear some news that would interest her. So she beat it out of here one night without saying a word to anyone. And when she got there, she found her son Bennie living there under the assumed name of Morris, as a farmhand. He told her that his father was dead. They had escaped to the island of Jamaica, where they had lived in seclusion till his father died from yellow fever, or some climatic disease, just a few months before that time. Of course, they were both innocent of the accusation, but Christie had had all the cards stacked against them, and they couldn't prove it.

"After the father's death the son Bennie, who was half dead with homesickness anyway, had decided to risk coming back here and living under an assumed name in some out-of-the-way place like the Virginia coast. He was constantly

risking discovery, but he could not endure being exiled any longer. He wanted to see his mother once, but warned her that it was very dangerous for her to come there often, and, of course, he could never go back to his home.

"Poor old Anne Shaw came back here all broken up over the death of her husband, and she began to get queerer than ever. Things must have gone on in this way for another six or eight years, and then she got word again to come down to Virginia, and went. This trip she found that her son had in the interval done pretty well in his work and married the daughter of the farmer for whom he was working. They had a small son—only a year-old baby then, who was also called Bennie. But the wife had just died of an illness she'd had for some time. Anne Shaw wanted to take the baby back with her and bring it up, but her son thought there might be too much question about it if she did, and as the wife's parents also wanted to keep it he decided that it had better stay where it was. But he promised that when the boy was older he should come up there and be near his grandmother in some capacity. Of course, the grandson would be free to go and

come as he pleased. The old lady came back here that time happier than she'd been since it all happened."

"That's what Mr. Yates said yesterday," commented Mercy. Her brother glanced at her in some astonishment.

"How did he come to tell you that?" he demanded.

"Oh, never mind!" cried Mercy. "I had a long talk with him, but I'll tell you all about it later. Go on with *your* story now!"

"Young Bennie grew up to be about eighteen or so and wanted to go to college. But his father hadn't been doing any too well and couldn't afford it, so he had Bennie enter the C. G. Service down at Virginia Capes and told him he could save up the money he made toward college a little later. He also told his son his own story and planned to have him transferred to this station after a while so that the young chap could be near his grandmother, who was getting old. Her son was worried about her living all alone in that queer way. He hoped that Bennie could be of some use to her. That's the reason why Bennie came here a year or so ago and, incidentally, why he's always acted so queer

about his connection with Anne Shaw. Of course he couldn't let on to anyone but herself that he was her grandson.

"Now we come to the grand climax. It must have been a little over a week ago that old Christie, who is still alive but far from a well man, came to Anne Shaw's son down in Virginia and confessed it was he and old Captain Morehead who cooked up the scheme to sell those maps to the Spanish government. He said Morehead was the prime mover in it, for he knew of the existence of the maps and that Shaw had been intrusted with them, and wanted to get possession of them and sell them to the enemy for a good round sum. He must have been a thoroughly unscrupulous scoundrel, and he knew well enough he couldn't get Shaw interested in any such dirty trick as that.

But Christie was different. He must have been always a rather well-meaning but pretty weak sort of an article. Morehead had some other hold over him, too—had evidently shielded him in some other things he'd done that were just a little shady, and could make it hot for Christie if he didn't come up to time.

"However that may have been, he got Christie

to agree to get hold of the maps for him if possible, and then they were going to share the loot. Shaw's illness on that first visit was quite opportune for Christie's purposes. He had the maps handed right to him instead of having to steal them as he had planned. But on the other hand he had to give Shaw a receipt for them which would be produced when the maps were inquired for, so he had to plan to get hold of that, too, somehow. He lost no time handing over the maps to Captain Morehead, and then came back on a second visit two or three weeks later to get hold of the receipt. This was simple enough. He told Shaw that his office had asked him to bring back the receipt so that it could be put among the files, and Shaw, who didn't expect to return for another week or two, very trustfully gave it to him.

"But while he was still there, something else turned up that hit his plans like a bombshell. Two Secret Service men blew in one day to question Shaw. Christie saw them coming and knew his game was up unless he could get rid of the receipt for the maps as well as several incriminating letters that had passed between him and Captain Morehead. He suddenly re-

membered a little secret cupboard in the tower of the house, that Shaw had once shown him as a curiosity, and how to open it. Shaw said even his wife didn't know of the existence of that cupboard. Christie's room was not far from the stairs on which this cupboard opened, and he just had a few unobserved moments in which to slip up the stairs and hide the letters and receipt in this cubbyhole. After that he was ready to swear to anything to save his skin. When the agents came he denied all knowledge of the maps, so both men were taken to New York.

"During the years that followed Christie got a number of appeals from Jamaica from the elder Shaw, begging him to tell the truth and free him and his son from the necessity of exile, but Christie was always too much of a coward to do so. Besides that, he couldn't do so without incriminating Morehead, and Morehead was paying him a regular hush-money sum for holding his tongue, which money he needed too much to do without. Christie kept track of the two Shaws, however, knew when the older one died and when the son came back to this country and where he was.

"Recently Christie, who is now an old man

and threatened with death from a fatal disease, came to Morehead, who had long since retired from the service and had been living somewhere over near Forked River on the other side of the Bay, and begged for more money to go away for treatments. Morehead was sore over being bled so long anyway over the old affair, and this new demand infuriated him. He told Christie he'd given him enough and was going to quit —that Christie didn't have any evidence to prove that he, Morehead, had been involved in it. They had a regular battle over the thing, and then Christie left him, informing him, as he went, that he knew where the son was and that he was going to tell him the whole thing. Morehead told him to go ahead and do it—and he did! But after he'd done so he wrote to Morehead saying he'd told the son the whole story, including one item that Morehead didn't know himself—till that minute—namely that the receipt for the map and the letters incriminating Morehead were all hidden still in that little secret cupboard at Windy Hollow, and that the son was coming up to find them!

"Then you'd better believe old Morehead got busy! It was vital for him to get hold of these

things before the son did, and he hustled over to the mainland across the Bay in his motor boat and tried to bullyrag poor old Anne Shaw into letting him search the house for a secret cupboard on the plea that he'd had secret information that there was one and that it contained evidence that would clear her family of disgrace. You see, he didn't care what happened about the receipts as long as he got hold of the letters incriminating himself. That let him out.

"But Anne Shaw had always hated him and distrusted him, and she wouldn't hear of such a thing now and turned him down cold. So of course he had to leave, but he wasn't done yet. That was the morning of the day we arrived. Naturally, however, though she didn't believe him, she began to be uneasy about this secret cupboard business and wonder if there might be something in it after all. And I imagine she did some tall hunting for it herself that day. But Captain Morehead had another trick up his sleeve. If she wouldn't let him search the house, he had a plan to remove her temporarily from the scene so she couldn't bother him, and do the hunting unhampered by her.

"But there wasn't any time to be lost, as the

son might appear any minute, so he came back that very night, sneaked into the house at dusk, came on the old lady up in the tower, and had some chloroform and a rag all ready to slip up behind her and tie around her mouth from behind. It would be easy to carry her outside where she couldn't bother him, and go ahead with his work. Unfortunately for him Anne Shaw got a glimpse of him just as he was creeping up the stairs and gave that scream you heard. He grabbed her and got the chloroform rag over her mouth, but not before her hand had been quite badly hurt in the struggle.

"He must have done some quick work getting her downstairs, for it wasn't long after that that you went in and up to the tower. Meantime he must have realized that there was some one around and slipped out with her and hidden under the veranda, through that broken part. He would have been comparatively safe there, and it was the only place you and Skinny didn't hunt through. I think he originally didn't mean to kidnap her at all—just to get her quieted with the choloroform while he did the hunting. But you and Skinny spoiled the job for him, and he didn't know what else to do with her.

"He must have decided to take her to his boat while you people went back to tell the Coast Guards. Of course, though, a lot of this is only guesswork, for we'll never know old Morehead's side of the story."

"Why not?" demanded Mercedes.

"I'll tell you why later," said Ken mysteriously, and went on with his story:

"Of course everything was one grand mix-up after that. The son got up here the next day and tried to get in touch with Bennie Morris—our Bennie. But of course he couldn't be seen around openly till the papers were found that cleared him, for there was a possibility that old Christie wasn't telling the truth, after all. Singularly enough, he had told Bennie to meet him at that same old Cushman shack where Anne Shaw was being kept a prisoner. I suppose it was the only place of that kind far enough away from the Station to be safe from observation and near enough for Bennie to get to on his patrols. He never dreamed that his mother was being kept a prisoner there. The old Captain had to keep her pretty well doped most of the time, with some drug he'd put in her food, or she might have been able to get free herself or

make enough outcry to attract the Coast Guards' attention when they got down that way.

"We spoiled that meeting the afternoon of the fog. Do you remember how queerly Bennie acted? He and his father had just met there when we came along and broke up the party. Bennie had to come back with us, or it would have looked too peculiar. His father was hiding down in an old shack below Tate's Beach Station, and it was he that Billy Tate had seen around that morning and thought it was Bennie. They look a good deal alike at a distance.

"The only chance that Bennie got to have a satisfactory talk with his father was the next night when you and Skinny tracked him down on his patrol and overhead scraps of that talk in the shack. Mr. Shaw told Bennie, as far as he could, about the location of the cupboard and persuaded him that it was safer for Bennie himself to try and find it, since he could go and come as a Coast Guard with freedom, than for an accused fugitive from justice to make the attempt. Poor Bennie realized that he might have a time with his Captain if he was caught around Windy Hollow, for he was already suspected of a good many derelictions, but promised

to try, for his grandmother's sake. He is awfully fond of the old lady, and was mightily upset over her disappearance.

"Well, anyhow, I can't remember all the different things that happened, but the upshot of it was this: Bennie didn't get a chance to get into the house, and the father got impatient at the delay, so last night he decided he wouldn't wait any longer but make one grand effort to get in there and find that thing himself. He took advantage of the storm, swiped Billy Tate's motor boat again (it was he that had taken it the two times before and Billy had fortunately forgotten to take out the battery, as he threatened) and got to Windy Hollow unmolested. He had planned to meet Bennie there, and they were going to try to work the thing together. But Captain Matson had kept Bennie on some unexpected work, so he couldn't get away till much later.

"Meanwhile Shaw found the place for once deserted, thanks to your little scheme for getting us all off in another locality. He found the cupboard without much difficulty, with the discription Christie had given him, got the papers, hurried back to the motor boat, and beat it

straight up to town to turn them over to the authorities. He hadn't been gone long when Morehead arrived on the scene. He had browbeaten the poor, half-doped old lady a day or two before into drawing a plan of the tower for him and locating a spot where she thought the cupboard might be. She said last night that she knew it couldn't be there, for she had searched herself, but she had to do something to satisfy him or she feared he might kill her. That was the paper I found that night—do you remember? It was he that was prowling around there and dropped it. And he must have watched me afterward and got it back. You see, he had one advantage around here. He was an old-timer in this region, lived just across the Bay, and could come and go pretty much as he pleased without any question. I've often met him fishing here on the beach.

"Anyhow, to get back to last night—Morehead came across the Bay in all that storm in his motor boat, got into the house, and must have made a bee line for the cupola. On the way up he saw something, however, that knocked him cold. For that secret cupboard was in the wall on the stairway that leads up to the cupola

—very nicely concealed behind the matchboarding, and no one would ever suspect an opening there except one that was wise to pretty much the exact location. Shaw had been before him and got the papers, but in his hurry and excitement to be off had left the little door of the cupboard open!

"When Morehead found that, he must have gone raging through the house looking for the one who had got ahead of him, for Bennie says that when he came in through the front door, Morehead went for him like a ton of brick, bellowing, 'What are you doing here, you dirty skunk?' Evidently he'd mistaken Bennie for his father. Bennie hadn't even time to say a word when Morehead up and knocked him cold, and he fell right where he was in the doorway and never knew another thing till we found him.

"I guess Morehead must have been pretty scared at what he'd done; probably he thought he'd killed Bennie. Anyhow, he evidently beat it back to his boat without delay. Probably he searched Bennie first, however, to see if he had the papers on him. We'll never know just *what* he did except that he got to his boat. For this morning he was missing from his home—they

found his boat overturned in the Bay and picked up his body a little later. The storm had done for him. You know how the rest of it turned out, so there's no use in going into that again."

"But wait—*wait!*" cried Mercedes, as Kenneth was preparing to get up and leave. "There are the greatest lot of things you haven't explained! What about those finger prints?"

"Hot snakes!" exclaimed Ken. "Do you suppose I've had time to go into all that? What's the difference, anyway, now that the whole thing's done?" Then, seeing the expression of disappointment on his sister's face, he added contritely, "As a matter of fact, I was curious myself about that and asked, last night. The finger prints in the tower must have been Anne Shaw's. Her hand was hurt that night in her struggle with Morehead—cut on a projecting nail and bled quite a little. And while he was getting her down the steps, she must have pressed it on the floor and the side. You and Skinny didn't notice it that night because it wasn't any too clear, and no one thought of examining the floor, anyway. Morehead probably discovered the one on the floor that night we came over in the fog. He was trying to wash it

out when we came along and caught someone up there. He must have felt like murdering us for spoiling his game every time he tried to work it. It was he that must have been prowling around in Anne Shaw's gray shawl, too. He probably took it as a sort of camouflage to try and deceive anyone into thinking it was Anne herself around in the dark."

"But what about those strands of the same kind of worsted that Billy Tate found in his motor boat?" demanded his sister. "Old Morehead wasn't in that—it was Mrs. Shaw's son."

"I noticed that he had a sweater on of the same kind of worsted as that shawl. It had quite a hole, too, in one sleeve, which would easily account for that. It isn't improbable that Mrs. Shaw knitted them both of the same material, at some time or other, and sent the sweater down to her son. What I'm more puzzled about is the queer performance that went on there the second night we were on the watch. Remember?—We stayed outside, but someone was certainly inside doing some curious kind of stunt. Skinny and I have figured it out that old Morehead

had come back that night to give the place the once-over, and we interrupted his game, as per usual. And possibly, to divert our attention or scare us away, he tried those ghostlike tricks—weaving around like a shadow there in the dining room. With that old gray shawl of Mrs. Shaw's, he could make a pretty good bluff at being a ghost. And when he found that didn't work, he sneaked out around to the barn and gave that awful yell we heard and drew us off there. And when that didn't work either and we were still hanging around, he probably gave it up for the night."

"Oh, I've just thought of something else!" cried Mercedes. "Do you remember the spectacles that were lying on the dining-room table all that day? When we went in that night, they were gone. He must have taken them, for I found them again last night on the little table in the shack. Perhaps Mrs. Shaw wanted them and made him get them."

"That's entirely likely," mused Ken, "especially if she was going to make that plan for him. She probably couldn't see to do things like that without her glasses. They dropped off her in that path through the woods the night he

kidnaped her, and were brought back by one of the C. G.'s, now I remember."

"There's one thing I haven't told you," said Mercedes suddenly. "Somehow, in all this excitement, I haven't had a chance." And she recounted to him her curious interview with Bennie, the previous afternoon, and his odd reception of the cuff link with the initials "B. M." "Now, who do you suppose that link could have belonged to?" she ended, handing the link to her brother.

"No doubt it was Captain Morehead's," decided Ken after examining it. "Perhaps you don't know it, but I remember that his name was Barach Morehead—the same initials. It doesn't look like one that either Bennie or his father would own at present. But why did you keep a thing like that quiet, anyhow?"

"I felt awfully sorry for Bennie," acknowledged Mercedes. "Somehow he seemed like a fine, honest sort of boy who was just 'in wrong' all around, in some way. It made me feel I wanted to help him out of it if I could. And I'll tell you another thing I did that same afternoon. I suppose you'll think it silly. But I was trying awfully hard that morning all the time I was

talking, to see the thumb of Bennie's left hand, for you know you all seemed to think it was he that made those finger prints, and it might get him in trouble. But he never happened to hold it so that I could see whether he had a little scar there. But, anyway, I wasn't going to take any chances on it, so yesterday afternoon I walked over past the Shaw house and went in and rubbed out that other print on the side of the stair with a wet rag, so there wouldn't be any danger of it being fastened on Bennie. I suppose it was a crazy thing to do, but I'm glad now I did."

"It isn't the only crazy thing you did," remarked Kenneth, "and the craziest was going off that way and leading us on that wild-goose chase last night. It might have turned out very differently. Goodness knows what might have happened if Morehead had decided to come there first! However, all's well that ends well, so there isn't any use saying anything more about that, I suppose. You certainly were the means of saving old Mrs. Shaw from a pretty sorry fate. After Morehead was drowned, nobody would have known where she was, and she

might have died down in that hole in a day or two."

Mercedes shuddered at the possibility. Then her mind was diverted by another thought.

"Who sent that queer typewritten note that Sanford got, do you think?"

"No doubt it was Morehead—who else *would* have been likely? Morehead had been around here enough to know that Skinny was in the habit of doing chores for Mrs. Shaw and therefore was always around to cramp his style. So he sent him the note from Toms River, hoping that maybe Skinny would take the hint. It was a forlorn hope, I guess! But, oh, say! I nearly forgot to tell you. This is all turning out pretty nicely for Bennie. His father said last night that Anne Shaw insists Bennie is to go away to college next fall, as he wishes to. She's got money saved up that's been lying idle all these years, and it's to be used for that. And her son is coming up here to live with her in his old home again and fix up the house and make her last years happy and comfortable. And, by the way, the old lady seems to have taken a great shine to you, Merce. She asked her son to tell me she'd like you to come over to see her this

afternoon. She feels pretty grateful for what you did for her and would like to get better acquainted."

"And now," he ended, scrambling to his feet, "I've spent enough of this vacation playing detective. I guess I'm pretty much of a dub at it, anyhow! From now on yours truly is going to devote his time to *fishing!*"

Before Mercedes could restrain him further, he was off and trudging down the beach, the wind ruffling his light hair, whistling vigorously the old tune:

"There were three bold fishermen
Set sail for Barnegat,
Fishing for porgies and sly mack-er-el!"

THE END

Gr 818
5

DUE DEC 3
DUE SEP 10
DUE JAN 14
DUE FEB 4
DUE FEB 27
DUE AUG 25
DUE MAR 21
DUE OCT 29
DUE APR 30
DUE AUG 22
DUE SEP 26

DUE JUL 11
DUE APR 5
DUE JUL 17
DUE AUG 11
DEC 1 1945
AUG 23 1946
MAR 5 1946
SEP 14 1948
FEB 2 1957

OCT 1931
BINDERS